**Search for Common Ground**

# Youth and Contentious Politics in Lebanon:

# DRIVERS OF MARGINALIZATION AND RADICALIZATION IN TRIPOLI

JUNE 2019

# Table of Contents

**About Search for Common Ground**

*Search for Common Ground (Search) is the world's largest dedicated peacebuilding organization. Search works to prevent and end violent conflict before, during, and after a crisis, striving to build sustainable peace for generations to come.*

*Founded in 1982, Search has an over 35-year track record of transforming the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches and toward cooperative solutions. Search does this through a type of peacebuilding called "conflict transformation." It shifts everyday interactions between hostile groups of people, so they can work together to build up their community, choosing joint problem-solving over violent means.*

*With a total of approximately 650 staff worldwide, Search implements projects from 50 offices and in 34 countries, including in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Search's headquarters are in Washington, D.C. and Brussels.*

*For more information on Search, visit the website at [https://www.sfcg.org](https://www.sfcg.org).*

## Acknowledgements

## List of Acronyms

**ADP** - Arab Democratic Party

**CSO** - Civil society organization

**CVE** - Countering violent extremism

**DFLP** - Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

**FSA** - Free Syrian Army

**FGD** - Focus group discussion

**ISF** - Internal Security Forces

**ISIL** - The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

**KII** - Key informant interview

**LAF** - Lebanese Armed Forces

**MENA** - Middle East and North Africa

**NGO** - Non-governmental organization

**PFLP** - Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

**Search** - Search for Common Ground

**SMT** - Social movement theory

**UNRWA** - United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

## Executive Summary

Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli has experienced waves of clashes in the years following the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005. From devastating terrorist attacks to extended violent clashes, these violent events have shaped Tripoli's outside reputation as a violent and dangerous place as well as how the community sees itself and its leaders. While Tripoli's residents often dismiss these events as the fault of outside forces (whether geopolitical, regional, or national) simply because they may resonate with larger or outside conflicts, such accusations are not helpful in explaining the reasons that a small but significant minority have been drawn to violence and violent extremism.

How can these events shape Tripoli's local politics in ways that can create or highlight divides in the community that lead to more violence or radicalization?  By employing the social movement and contentious politics theories, this research focuses on how violent extremists in Tripoli might exploit these issues and create or adopt local narratives to frame these issues in ways that create conflicts with a clear (1) aggrieved/victimized in-group, (2) an enemy or source of the grievance (out-group), and (3) justify specific, violent responses. The case studies below will explore specific instances of social tension and how they may be exploited by violent extremists to drive radicalization and recruitment.

In total, Search engaged a total 192 individuals (126 male and 66 female) in 19 focus group discussions and 33 interviews to understand the contexts in which young people in Tripoli are at risk of radicalization and answer the following key research questions:

- Why are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?
- Which groups of young people in Tripoli are being radicalized?
- How are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?
- Where are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?

This research illuminates, by employing social movement theory, contentious politics theory, and a social constructivist approach, how violent extremist groups benefit from a vocabulary of contention (often towards local and central governments) shared by marginalized communities to build imagined commonalities with them. By creating the illusion of common cause with various local non-violent social movements, violent extremist groups set themselves up as allies and frame their violent approaches as parallel pathways to achieving the movement's (even indefinite) goals. Furthermore, violent extremist groups frame incidents of social contention as existential struggles and call for in-group sympathizers to join them to protect the collective identity from an

external threat. The three case studies selected and explored here demonstrate how violent extremist groups may be able to manipulate or even co-opt incidents of social tension to further their own agendas and draw in recruits. They are: (1) The 2013 bombings of the al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques, (2) the 2012 release of a film defamatory to the Prophet Mohammed and Islam, and (3) the 2016 reductions and changes to benefits to Palestinians by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The case studies explore how each incident becomes a fault line where narratives from those within the community as well as from violent extremists begin to frame community understandings and reactions to current crises. The study's main findings are listed below:

## Key Findings

- **Youth need greater opportunities for growth, advancement, and meaning.** Interestingly, this was not necessarily linked specifically to employment or economic grievances. Rather, youth and especially civil society actors emphasized the need for opportunities (whether economic or not) that could provide them with feelings of dignity, respect, agency, and value. Importantly, youth saw such opportunities as providing them with a clear pathway to a future which could prevent them from being diverted along other pathways to violence or violent extremism.
- **Families have an important role in the prevention of youth becoming radicalized as well as in radicalization.** While respondents pointed to examples of family members radicalizing other individuals in their families, they also confirmed the importance of family influence on their decision-making. Overall, respondents believed that families could help resolve conflicts, highlighting the importance of households. Inversely, breakdowns in inter-generational communication or family conflict are particular sources of vulnerability to radicalization.
- **Harassment and abuses by security forces is a key factor that can aggravate radicalization.** It is evident that negative encounters with security forces affirm the systemic grievances and alienation of marginalized young people. Police are often the most visible facet of government, so real or perceived injustices by them may affect vertical cohesion as a whole.
- **Poor youth interactions with government offices contribute to marginalization.** The highly bureaucratic nature of service provision and the perception that most state services and opportunities are difficult or impossible for youth to access contributes to feelings of hopelessness, lack of self-worth, and lack of trust of the state.

- **Identity and identity politics are key factors in making youth more vulnerable to radicalization.** In Lebanon, politics are highly linked to confessional identity, but also sharply divided over the Syrian conflict.
- **Media is often a polarizing force during times of contention.** This was particularly in the case of Lebanon.
- **Communities lack spaces to foster positive engagement and reinforce linkages with their communities.** This, in turn, further marginalizes youth.
- **Radicalization trends are shifting.** Violent extremist groups actively recruit youth from Tripoli (both male and female), although the trend of the flow of foreign fighters to the neighboring Syrian conflict has diminished. Participants feared that this could result in increased domestic threats.

## Why are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?

- The phenomenon of radicalization is often simplified as a financial transaction, dismissed as a product of paid "mercenaries." While it is true that many recruits receive some form of financial compensation, engagement in violent extremism is far more complex, as explained by the majority of civil society participants.
- Violent extremist and armed groups active in or recruiting from Lebanon have proven themselves adept at embedding themselves into local conflict and shaping the narratives in ways that deepen or reframe tensions between other groups or the government and its institutions.
- Violent extremist groups appeal to Tripoli's youth with highly gendered rhetoric that calls for potential recruits to "defend" their identity group or women and children.
- Despite significant differences, Tripoli's Sunni and Alawite youth describe similar feelings of marginalization and rootlessness leading some to be drawn into local clashes or into the fighting in Syria.
- The longstanding issue of large numbers of Tripoli's Sunni youth recently or currently imprisoned for years without trial remains a strong source of tension and is often cited as a driver of feelings of victimization and marginalization.

## Which groups of young people in Tripoli are being radicalized?

The following groups were found to have particular vulnerabilities to radicalization, although these factors cannot be interpreted as constituting "profiles" of potential violent extremists:

- The majority of people in Tripoli who have become radicalized and have gone to fight in Syria are young, between the ages of 15 to 30.
- Stateless individuals (*maktoumat al-qayd*) have significantly fewer opportunities and have an increased vulnerability to the appeal of radicalization.

- Youth who experience negative encounters with security services.
- Youth who are related or have relationships with radicalized individuals.
- Those who have been targeted by violent acts or exposed to violence in their homes.

### How are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?

- Unlike other contexts, online recruitment is not a very salient factor in Tripoli.
- However, social media and Lebanon's divided media landscape contribute to disseminating narratives that contribute to marginalization.
- Drugs are particular pathways to radicalization, building dependencies and relationships with violent extremists who provide them.
- Support for opposition to Syria's Bashar al-Assad by certain political and religious leaders has helped to create a dynamic that has (even unintentionally) funneled Lebanese recruits to violent extremist groups like ISIL and al-Nusra, which are seen by potential recruits as stronger and more successful groups.
- While violent extremists may leverage religious rhetoric and the local vocabulary of contention (whether towards the Lebanese government, parties in Syria, or other domestic parties), their appeals are largely not religious-based.

### Where are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?

- The general lack of the Lebanese state's presence inside Palestinian camps has created the increased potential for violent extremist groups (often wanted persons from outside areas) to exploit these spaces as safe havens.
- While the seven neighborhoods focused on as part of this study were found to show indications of being "hotspots" of radicalization, the revelation of radicalization trends in other neighborhoods in Tripoli do not allow for findings which would support overlooking other neighborhoods for CVE programming.

### What are the structural drivers of violent extremism in Tripoli, and how do they contribute to an individual's increased vulnerability to violent extremism?

- Support for the Lebanese military is strong and shared across Lebanon's various confessions. However, distrust in the military is prevalent among Tripoli's marginalized youth, many of whom perceive it as partial to other sects and factions.
- Distrust for national and local political leaders is extremely high. Political
- Harassment and heightened scrutiny on (particularly Sunni) youth by security services creates feelings of victimization and marginalization, furthering worsening relations and undermining the initial successes of the April 2014 security plan.

- Lebanon's media landscape is highly distrusted, and Tripoli participants view media outlets as biased and divided.
- All of Tripoli's sects perceive that they are underrepresented in public institutions.
- While the majority of Tripoli's politicians and religious leaders actively promote coexistence, the conflation of political parties and religion in Lebanon's confessional system means that political tensions may also be equated as religious ones.

# Introduction

Understanding the processes underlying radicalization to violence among youth and their enlistment in violent extremist organizations has been a key area of concern for national governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the international community in recent years, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While there is a widespread appreciation of the real and perceived grievances, as well as the sense of alienation and marginalization from institutional and political processes that can encourage young people to seek an alternative sense of solidarity and community in violent extremist movements, it is also increasingly understood that it can be difficult, and dangerous, to over-simplify these processes and generalize across different contexts.

Gaining a deeper, contextualized understanding of the different social and political landscapes in which radicalization can take place, and the dynamics of the processes involved, is critical if appropriate interventions are to be developed and implemented to counter this phenomenon, mitigate the conditions that encourage it, and provide youth in the MENA region with alternative pathways for the future.

With this in mind, Search for Common Ground (Search) conducted this research to better understand the contexts in which young people are at risk of radicalization and respond to the following key research questions:

- Why are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?
- Which groups of young people in Tripoli are being radicalized?
- How are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?
- Where are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?

By answering these key questions, the research aimed to: i) achieve an increased understanding of individual and structural drivers of violent extremism among vulnerable groups of youth in Tripoli, Lebanon and Morocco; ii) assess the formal and informal channels used by vulnerable individuals to access local institutions across various sectors, including both government and civil society; and iii) to understand how these institutions can be strengthened to contribute to better resilience among youth.

The initial research component of this program was undertaken by Search in a set of communities in Lebanon and Morocco commonly described as "hotspots" for radicalization, and sought to understand both the context and the lived experiences of youth in their communities, how they perceive and report on the different pathways open to them, and the decisions they have taken regarding those pathways and why. The following report documents the findings in Lebanon, which took place in the city of Tripoli.

It is important to note that over a year has passed since the data collection was completed and that a number of changes have occurred in the context (including dynamics in both Lebanon and Syria) which may affect the findings' relevance in the contemporary context. However, the study's focus on recent and historical events and narratives and how they shape local dynamics, perceptions, and relationships which are used by violent extremist groups to radicalize youth has allowed these findings to retain their relevance. This is because the same or similar events or issues continue to influence the context. Many dynamics have persisted, such as power dynamics in Lebanon, trends of political and economic marginalization, and the ongoing detention of Sunni Muslims from Tripoli. In addition, a number of more recent events have occurred that have reinforced or threatened to make Tripoli relive experiences that can drive new waves of radicalization, such as a thwarted plot to bomb mosques in Tripoli (see Case Study 1) and the United States of America's recent decision to withdraw financial support from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA – see Case Study 3). Furthermore, the research is helpful in mapping out these patterns and gaps in government and civil society responses to incidents of tension as well as sources of resilience. However, readers should continue to reflect on Tripoli's ever-changing context and how these changes affect the relevance of this study's findings.

## Theoretical Framework: Violent Extremism as a Social Movement

Since the post-2010 Arab uprisings, violent extremist groups have found opportunities to take root in marginalized communities and encourage individuals to either join their ranks as foreign fighters or perpetrate domestic attacks. This mobilization across the region has displayed a common repertoire of contention, grievance, and use of religion as a focal point. Through exploiting these themes, recent recruitment efforts by violent extremist groups have at times attempted to situate their agendas as alternative pathways to reach the goals set out by non-violent social movements. With this vocabulary of contention among marginalized groups across the region becoming more prevalent since the Arab Spring, it is critical that researchers explore how violent extremist groups co-opt this rhetoric to emphasize commonalities between the region's marginalized peoples and their violent groups, and identify any evident patterns.

The methodology of this report draws from the contentious politics and social movement theories, which provide a framework to explore imagined commonalities and how they facilitate violent radicalization. For the purposes of this study, violent radicalization (or hereinafter simply radicalization) is defined as *the process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly violent and extreme political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies*. This definition resonates with the theoretical framework of this study. Contentious politics, according to Leitner et al., refers to "concerted, counter-hegemonic social and political action in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries."[1]

The theory of contentious politics suggests that individuals engage in contentious politics in moments of changing political opportunities and by using collective action create new opportunities which are then used by others to widen the subject of contention and those who would be drawn to participate.[2] The tactic can be employed non-violently such as in 2011 when demonstrations of secular and religious groups in Egypt led to the ousting of President Mubarak. Unfortunately, violent extremist groups such as The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Qaeda have also found success in exploiting political opportunities through this approach. *Radicalized* contentious politics (which, importantly, must be distinguished from the broader politics at play in Tripoli, Lebanon, and the region), would therefore employ *violent extremist narratives* to create "alternative imaginaries" and guide supporters to *extreme and violent actions* to challenge dominant systems of authority. The multi-dimensional contentious politics theory enables an exploration of specific politico-social environments. In

---

[1] Helga Leitner, Eric Sheppard, and Kristin M. Sziarto, "The Spatialities of Contentious Politics," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 168
[2] Tilly, Charles and Sidney G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

accordance, this research investigates the shaping of political opportunities in relation to other factors such as ethnicity, class, or gender.[3]

In contemporary scholarship, violent extremism and religious activism have frequently been analyzed through the lens of social movement theory (SMT), which explores how collective identity connects with collective actions.[4] The application of the theory can be strengthened by expanding the connections between cultural and social grievances, and exploring how collective identity connects with collective actions.[5]

Recent literature on violent extremism demonstrates renewed interest in the investigation of how political opportunities can be used to try and create legitimacy for violent extremism. However, few studies explicitly specify the processes that produce violence out of non-violent forms of contention, such as those episodes of tension explored in the case studies below.[6] By framing the strategies of communication and identifying the nature of available 'political opportunities' exploited by violent extremist groups to reach out to marginalized groups, it becomes possible to deconstruct these processes.

This research maps a repertoire of collective actions, which may range from peaceful initiatives to coercive and even violent action. Unlike other theories exploring recruitment in violent groups, the focus on social movements enables researchers to expand the definition of 'movements' beyond structured, organized, and politicized entities or defined agendas.

This theoretical framework, in combination with fieldwork research and analysis below, identifies the specific individual and structural drivers to violent extremism in Tripoli, Lebanon. First, it covers the behavioral and institutional phenomena related to the use of discourse to challenge power holders. The research analyses three instances of 'political opportunities' as case studies, enabling Search to assess violent extremist narratives within a larger discussion of contention at the local, national, and regional levels. Secondly, it explores the extent to which the appeal of violent extremism can be considered an alternative understanding and approach within the contentious politics in Lebanon. A potent example of this is ISIL's narratives transforming the Syrian conflict from a 'revolution' or a 'civil war' to a so-called 'global war against Sunni Islam' in order to attract foreign fighters.

---

[3] Adam Tickell et al., *Politics and Practice in Economic Geography* (SAGE, 2007), 267.
[4] Asaf Bayat, "Islamism and Social Movement Theory," *Third World Quarterly*, 26, no. 6 (2005): 891–908; Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004).
[5] Asaf Bayat, "Islamism and Social Movement Theory," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 6 (September 1, 2005): 891–908.
[6] Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004).

Finally, this study's framework enables a more dynamic understanding of the processes of radicalization. Often, what makes violent extremism attractive to marginalized youth is the way it presents as a movement in which individuals are empowered as agents of change.

## Methodology

This study consisted of two phases of data collection, which took place from late June to late July 2017 by Search's research team. Phase I aimed to understand individual drivers and pathways to violent radicalism, while Phase II examined the potential for community institutions to either reduce or exacerbate tensions between individuals and structural factors in their communities. Ultimately, the analysis contributes to building an understanding of how to increase individual resilience to violent extremism as well as the capacity of governments and civil society to play a role in developing this resilience.

Phase I sought to understand the lived experiences of marginalized youth in relation to radicalization and the nuanced pathways of vulnerable individuals to violent extremism. Phase I data collection utilized focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and surveys to address these questions. The data collection tools, including interview guides for FGDs and KIIs and survey questionnaires, were developed by Search and piloted prior to the data collection, which occurred in July and August of 2017. Data entry and analysis of the surveys was completed through the statistical analysis program SPSS.

In order to achieve the objectives of Phase I, Search conducted 14 FGDs. Ten of the focus groups were held with marginalized youth from Tripoli, including one focus group with Palestinian youth from the Baddawi refugee camp.[7] Marginalized youth were selected to participate when they had at least one of the following criteria, which are commonly cited as factors of marginalization: stateless; school dropout; history of arrest; non-traditional family structure; relation or connection to a violent extremist; victim of violent acts or exposure to violent actions within the home; university graduate working within the informal sector who is unable to access the job market; migrant; unemployed; or poor. However, the inclusion of these criteria is not meant to suggest that they are push factors for radicalization. The youth targeted (a sample of 94 participants) were predominantly active residents of the seven targeted neighborhoods and were all between the ages of 18 and 30.

Phase I FGDs were also held with CSOs working on youth issues, and separately with marginalized youth. Search convened three FGDs with representatives of civil society in Tripoli, including one formalized network of youth-led organizations (24 discussants in total). One additional FGD with 11 women was organized; however half of the participants were significantly older than the target age, so that FGD was not included

---

[7] Sometimes referred to as the "new camp" by participants, Baddawi was established in 1955. It is more like a neighbourhood of its own than what one might envision when considering a "camp." (See "Beddawi Camp," *UNRWA*, accessed August 18, 2017, https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/beddawi-camp.)

with other data that was exclusively "youth." The pre-focus group surveys of those over the age of 30 were not included in dataset. Some of their insights are included in the text and analysis wherever valuable, and are explicitly differentiated from other focus groups.

Finally, Phase I conducted six KIIs including stakeholders with insight on the issue of violent extremism from various angles. They featured CVE researchers and practitioners, Sunni and Alawite sheikhs, and a local journalist.

Phase II sought to understand the relationships youth have with community institutions through specific instances of tension that could lead to radicalization and/or decreased resilience through the identification of three case studies. Each case study was selected based on a relevant incident of tension, which in keeping with contentious politics theory, represented a political opportunity to shape—and possibly redefine—these relationships.

The case studies were conducted by relying on FGDs, KIIs, and desk research. Phase II FGDs were held with a variety of local stakeholders, including: victims, participants, or witnesses of the selected incidents; CSOs working on incidents of social tensions in their communities; activists; religious leaders; and community leaders. These FGDs (one per case study) were conducted with the aim of exploring key areas of community tension that could be used as a lens through which to view contentious politics, which often play out in the relationships between youth and community institutions. Further, the FGDs sought to understand how these relationships exacerbated or reduced the sense of marginalization or division and how these outcomes could impact radicalization pathways and mobilization.

KIIs were held in Phase II with both (1) community stakeholders and (2) local elected or appointed government officials. A community stakeholder was defined as an active resident of targeted neighborhoods or municipalities and included youth between the ages of 18 and 30, as well as community leaders. Selected community stakeholders may have been politically neutral or affiliated with a political party or movement. Importantly, identified individuals must have been affected by, connected to, or engaged with the response to at least one of the specific incidents of tension between youth and community institutions. The selected local officials interviewed for the purposes of this study represented the target areas and were involved in or familiar with the official response to the incidents of tension.

The metropolitan area commonly referred to as Tripoli includes the three municipalities of Tripoli, Mina, and Baddawi. The Fayhaa Union of Municipalities (as it is formally

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 54 | 62.1% |
| Female | 32 | 36.8% |
| N/A | 1 | 1.1% |
| **Age** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| 18-19 | 32 | 36.8% |
| 20-24 | 27 | 31.0% |
| 25-29 | 19 | 21.8% |
| 30 | 7 | 8.0% |
| N/A | 2 | 2.3% |
| **Level of education** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| Never been to school | 5 | 5.7% |
| Primary school | 30 | 34.5% |
| Secondary school | 17 | 19.5% |
| Vocational training | 22 | 25.3% |
| University | 13 | 14.9% |
| **Employment status** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| Unemployed | 61 | 70.1% |
| Occasionally employed | 10 | 11.5% |
| Employed | 14 | 16.1% |
| N/A | 2 | 2.3% |
| **Marriage status** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| Not Married | 52 | 59.8% |
| Married | 22 | 25.3% |
| N/A | 13 | 14.9% |

| Nationality | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Lebanese | 74 | 85.1% |
| Syrian/Palestinian | 6 | 6.9% |
| N/A | 7 | 8.0% |
| **Religion*** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| Muslim Sunni | 53 | 60.9% |
| N/A | 21 | 24.1% |
| Muslim | 7 | 8.0% |
| Alawi | 4 | 4.6% |
| Not religious | 2 | 2.3% |
| **Area of residence** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| Bab al-Tabbaneh | 24 | 27.6% |
| Jabal Mohsen | 16 | 18.4% |
| Greater Tripoli | 14 | 16.1% |
| Mankoubin | 10 | 11.5% |
| Wadi al-Nahle | 7 | 8.0% |
| Qobbe | 6 | 6.9% |
| Mina | 4 | 4.6% |
| Baddawi | 3 | 3.4% |
| N/A | 3 | 3.4% |

N/A = Not available

*Due to the high number of respondents who refused to state their religion (particularly among Alawite youth), no cross-tabulation by religion was possible.

Note: Frequency equals the number of respondents who self-identified as such on the survey (87), but due to tardiness and other issues, not all focus group participants (94 in total, with 59 young men and 35 young women) completed a survey. All percentages are of the total survey sample, but due to rounding may not add up to 100%.

**Table 2: Demographic information of civil society survey respondents in Tripoli (n=24)**

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 16 | 66.7% |
| Female | 8 | 33.3% |
| **Age** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| N/A | 1 | 4.2% |
| 20-24 | 6 | 25.0% |
| 25-29 | 5 | 20.8% |
| 30-34 | 4 | 16.7% |
| 35-39 | 3 | 12.5% |
| 40-49 | 5 | 20.8% |
| **Employment status** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| N/A | 1 | 4.2% |
| Employed | 15 | 62.5% |
| Unemployed/Volunteer | 8 | 33.3% |
| **Nationality** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| N/A | 2 | 8.3% |
| Lebanese | 21 | 87.5% |
| Other | 1 | 4.2% |

called), hosts over 300,000 residents, including tens of thousands of Palestinians scattered throughout the city but clustered in the Baddawi refugee camp.[8] The majority of Tripoli's residents are Sunni Muslims, with significant Alawite and Christian communities. A series of consultations narrowed the scope of the study to seven neighborhoods believed to be the most vulnerable to violent extremism: Bab al-Tabbaneh, Baddawi, Jabal Mohsen, Mankoubin, Mina, Qobbe, and Wadi al-Nahle.

Tables 1 and 2 below provide a full breakdown of the demographics of Phase I pre-focus group youth and civil society survey respondents from the seven target areas.

Youth participants revealed a number of interesting demographic characteristics. They primarily came from large households, with a median household size of six. The majority was unemployed (70%), 11% worked irregularly, and only 16% were employed. Female participants were more likely to be unemployed than male participants (81% to 63%, respectively). Most were unmarried (60%).

Like many in Tripoli, the number of youth participants who dropped out of school was high, with 40% never attending school or receiving only a primary school education. Young female participants were more likely to have higher education levels than the male participants.

This Tripoli cohort was also politically apathetic, with 70% not active and 20% reporting that they were not interested in politics. Over two thirds were not even affiliated with any movement or group on social media.

---

[8] Elias Abou Mrad et al., "Inclusive Urban Strategy and Action Plan: Bab Al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen," Tripoli: Beyond Reform & Development, January 2015.

Somewhat higher levels of participants reported being involved with community activities. However, 62% said that they were not involved, with women even less likely to be involved than young men. Level of participation generally trended upwards as education level increased, revealing concerns that apathy among the less educated may be higher and/or that targeting by community or NGO activities fails to reach them. The few respondents involved were scattered across a range of activities including charity, voluntary organizations, CSOs, or scouting.

### *Limitations*

A number of issues complicated the data collection. First, some youth scheduled for discussions did not attend out of fear of crossing security checkpoints, even though the security situation in Tripoli during the data collection period was stable. Second, due to issues of tardiness or refusal, not all youth who participated in focus group discussions completed a survey. When they did, the response rate for many of the questions on the youth survey was quite low depending on the questions. In particular, respondents were unwilling to disclose their nationality and their religion. Despite having one focus group specifically drawing in Palestinian residents of the Baddawi camp (with the possibility of other Palestinians being included in the other focus groups), most Palestinians listed their nationality instead as Lebanese or Syrian according to the country they were raised in.[9] Furthermore, despite a number of focus groups targeting Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen, most Alawite participants refused to identify themselves as such. These issues prohibited cross-tabulation or disaggregation analysis by nationality and religious traits. Also, while attempts were made to assemble gender and religiously homogenous youth focus groups, it is important to note that no chilling effect was observed when focus groups were not homogenous, observing that Alawites, Sunnis, young women, and young men appeared to respond openly and equally in mixed groups.

Due to time constraints and the prevalence of Muslim youth in the targeted neighborhoods, marginalized Christian youth were not able to be included in the research (approximately ten percent of Tripoli's population is Christian). While measures were taken to ensure that all participants were Lebanese citizens or Lebanese-Palestinians, the high number of Syrian refugees and long-term Syrian residents in the city resulted in a limited number of Syrians being included in the focus groups through the sampling process. Their insights are included in the data analysis as relevant.

For many of the youth participants, issues of illiteracy, limited education or difficulty in understanding required the facilitator to rephrase questions and sometimes to read

---

[9] Lebanon does not grant citizenship to Palestinians born or living in Lebanon.

them the questionnaire. Like the data collection in the other countries, the sensitivity of the subject material complicated convening discussions on the topic of violent extremism. To avoid being considered as offensive or as a clandestine intelligence work by the targeted vulnerable populations, the questionnaire and discussion of the study required indirect, open-ended questions that allowed participants to voluntarily and independently bring up issues regarding violent extremism.

Finally, the sensitivity and complexity of the phenomenon of radicalization hindered the conclusions possible from this research. For example, when youth recounted their experiences of being approached for recruitment or having been drawn to radicalization, most participants refrained from specifying the violent extremist groups involved, rendering it difficult to survey the kinds of groups active in particular areas or to link specific recruitment strategies to specific groups. Another limitation in drawing conclusions is the natural tendency for participants in focus groups to exhibit social desirability bias in recounting their experiences of participating in violence or being imprisoned, such as by saying that they did nothing wrong by engaging in violence or were innocent of the alleged crimes. Fear of judgment from researchers and fellow participants also likely had a chilling effect on youth participants expressing sympathy for viewpoints considered to be held by violent extremist groups. Lastly, it was impossible for Search to validate the claims made by participants, except in a limited number of cases when other participants could affirm their accounts.

# Results of the Research in Tripoli, Lebanon
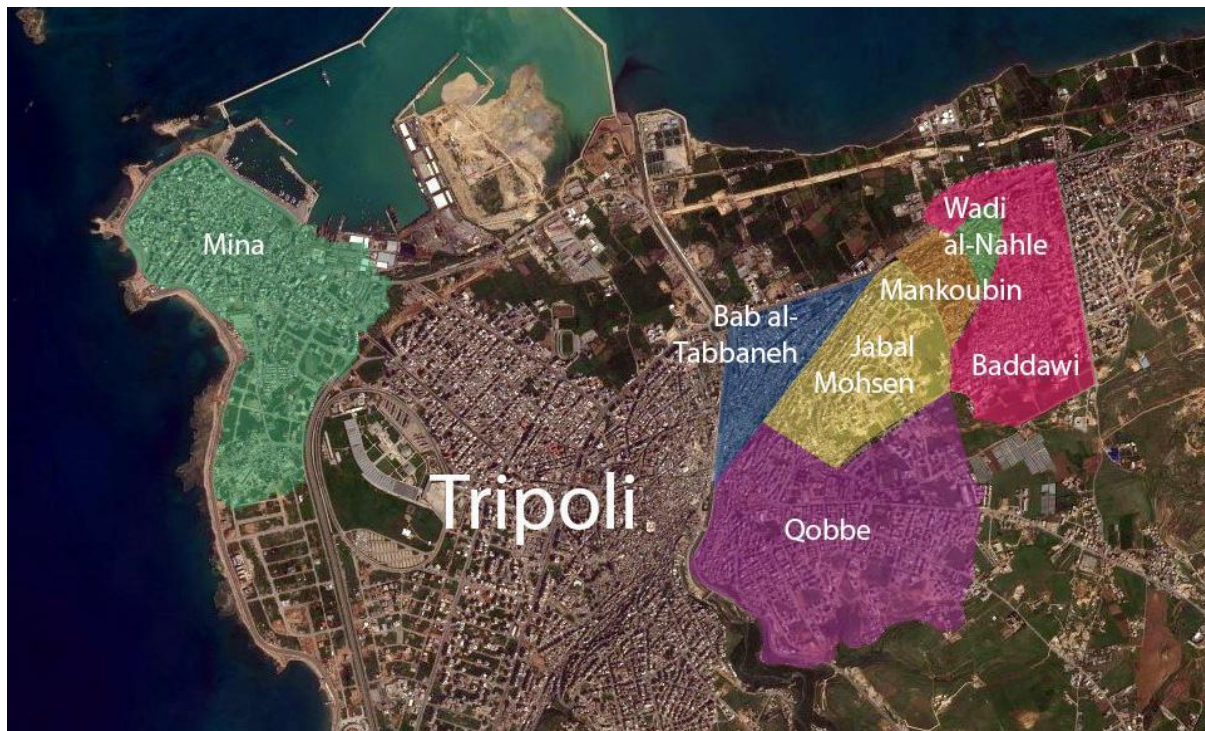


## *Context Analysis*

Situated along the Mediterranean coast, Tripoli (*Tarabulus* in Arabic) stands as one of the most important cities in the Levant and a historical hub. However, the Lebanese Civil War (including Syria's long-time occupation of the city) and the ongoing conflict in Syria have left the city side-lined—from failures to rebuild, promote reconciliation, and prevent violence. As one local official described it to Search, Tripoli is a "country between two countries" and claimed by neither.

While Tripoli is frequently maligned as a dangerous place, it is an important tourist attraction. The city boasts a unique atmosphere, more reminiscent of other Arab cities along the Mediterranean coast than the fast-developing national capital of Beirut. Unfortunately, the uprising in neighboring Syria challenged its residents as long-standing fault lines were re-exposed. From 2011 to 2014, the city experienced sporadic waves of violence, including suicide and car bombings as well as open street battles, mainly between the residents of Jabal Mohsen and those of the surrounding areas. The aptly named Syria Street served as the frontline between Sunni groups who opposed Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, and the mainly Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen, who largely supported his continued rule. Residents on both sides have travelled to Syria to fight on opposing sides. These clashes continued until 2014, when the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) implemented the security plan in April.

Lebanon itself represents a particularly complex context for the processes of radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters. The country borders Syria, the current epicenter of conflict in the region, and, given Syria's history of involvement in Lebanon's internal affairs as well as Lebanon's own internal conflicts, Lebanon's experience with radicalization is not surprising. According to the Soufan Group, around 900 Lebanese are fighting with radical organizations (particularly ISIL) in Syria and Iraq.[10]

Lebanon also has a long history on the frontline of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict in the region and the continued presence of nearly 200,000 Palestinian refugees within its borders,[11] currently joined by over one million refugees from Syria,[12] represents a significant pool of people whose vulnerable conditions represent potential opportunities for violent extremist recruitment.

The conflictual relations between religious groups in the country exacerbate this potential. The Sunni population of the country (estimated at about 27% of the population) had historically shared power with the Christian majority. In recent years, the growing activism and power of the Shi'a minority (with roughly the same proportion of Lebanon's population as Sunnis) has left Sunnis feeling increasingly marginalized and threatened.[13] At the same time, Tripoli's residents are eager to recast their city in a new light. Indeed, many residents reject accusations that the city is a hotspot of violent extremism. One Christian priest described "the Islamic city of Tripoli [as] the most tolerant city between cities and the most loving city of coexistence."

This chapter reports the findings of Search's investigation into the drivers of violent extremism in Tripoli, as seen through the eyes of its youth, civil society actors, religious leaders, and local officials. It explores the experiences of its residents and a number of specific examples of social tension, which map out a variety of pathways that have drawn youth to radicalize and engage in violence, including recruitment in violent extremist organizations.

## *Radicalization to Violent Extremism*

Both youth and civil society participants were aware of the problems in their communities. For them, the experiences of marginalization, frustration, violence, and violent extremism are prevalent where they work or live, often making it personal.

---

[10] The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*. New York: The Soufan Group, 2015. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

[11] See Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee, Central Administration of Statistics, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *The Population and Housing Census in Palestinian Camps and Gatherings - 2017, Key Findings Report (Population, Buildings and Housing Units)*, (Beirut, Lebanon: 2018).

[12] UNHCR. "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency information sharing portal - Lebanon." Accessed August 20 2017. http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122

[13] Hilal Khashan. "The Political Isolation of Lebanese Sunnis" *Middle East Quarterly.* Summer 2013, pp.69-75.

Violence is a common problem. Well over half of the marginalized youth who participated in the data collection reported having seen violence in their community (62%), with a quarter of the respondents reporting that the level of violence was "very violent" or "high" (see Figure 1 below). Civil society discussants were asked for a more detailed response as to whether and, if so, how frequently they saw violence in their communities. The vast majority answered in the affirmative: 29% said always, 13% frequently, and 42% occasionally.

**Figure 1: Youth perceptions of the level of violence in their community in Tripoli (n=87)**

**In general, how would you describe the level of violence in the neighbourhood you live in?**
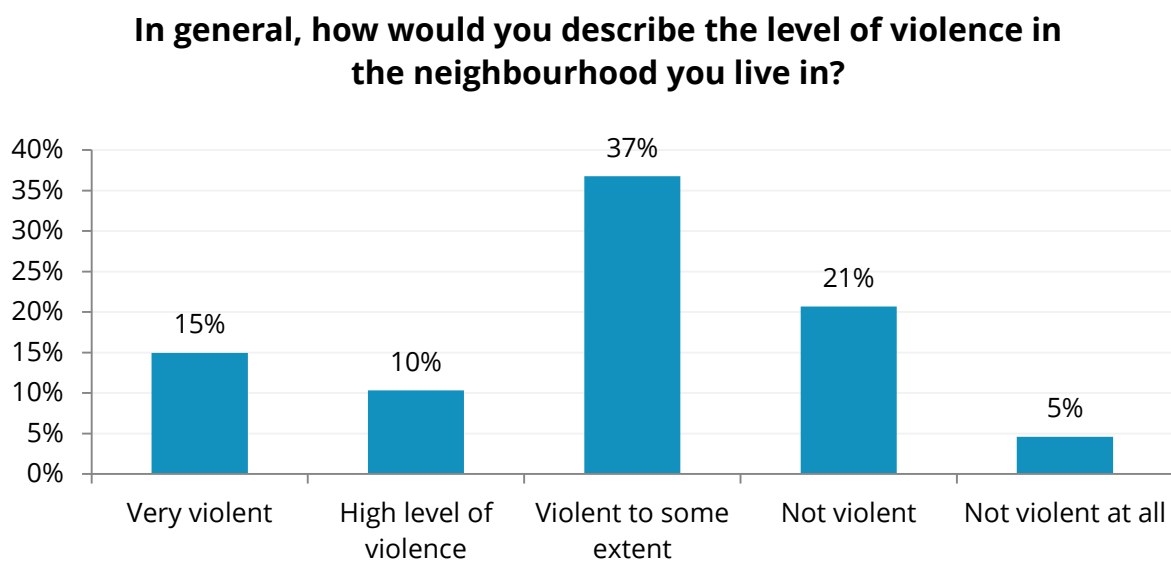


Similar to youth responses, civil society actors largely reported moderate levels of violence across the target communities. Bab al-Tabbaneh was perceived as the most violent (with 42% saying that the neighborhood had "very high" or "high" levels of violence), followed by Qobbe (at 17%).

**Figure 2: Types of violence prevalent in Tripoli respondents' communities ($n_1$=87 and $n_2$=24)**

**What types of violence have you seen in your community?**
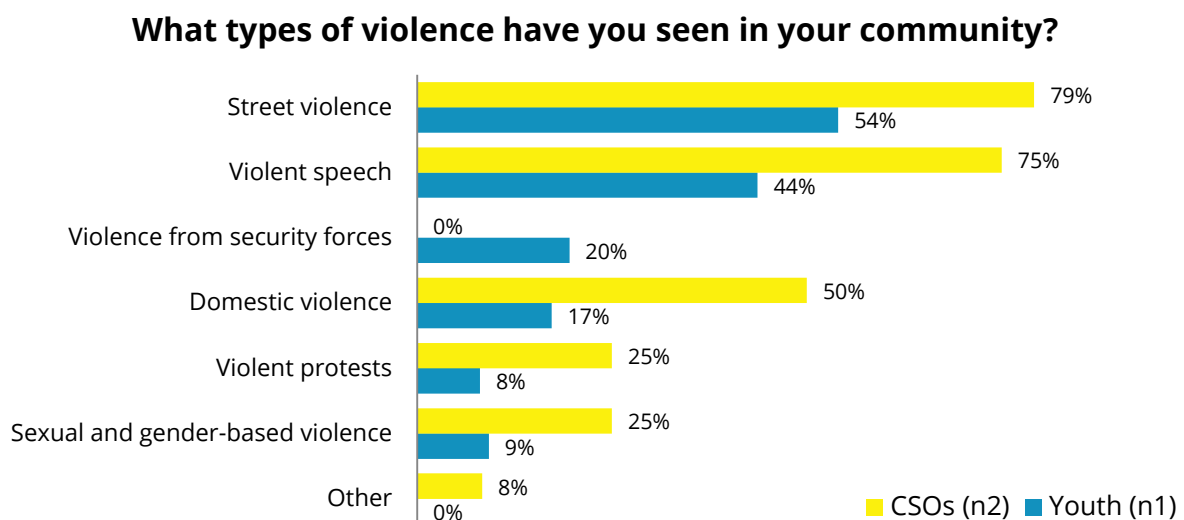
The majority of youth respondents reported street violence as the most common form of violence, followed by violent speech and violence from security forces. Domestic violence was close behind. Civil society respondents largely echoed these views (see Figure 2 above). Women were twice as likely to report domestic violence, raising questions as to whether young men are dismissive or simply less aware of this issue. The starkest gender divide, however, regarded violence from security forces, with none of the young women surveyed reporting this, compared to over 30% of the young men. Significantly, this was solely observed by the youngest male youth, as no civil society respondents reported seeing such incidents, suggesting that security forces may particularly target very young men for scrutiny or that young men are getting caught in a disproportionately higher number of confrontations with security forces.

There was a broad range of responses as to how levels of violence compared to the previous year, with little consensus. Civil society actors generally purported that levels of violence had decreased or remained at the same. Other participants to the focus groups mentioned the opposite observation, citing increased levels of violence since 2015-2016.

When asked what their top problems were, youth overwhelmingly discussed unemployment, followed by a variety of social and infrastructure issues such as education, poor infrastructure, trash, cost of living, sectarianism and racism. Crime, as well as drug use and the presence of "thugs" in the streets were also prominent issues. Safety was also a common (though less cited) issue, with many respondents concerned with violence from a variety of state and non-state actors, including terrorism. Civil society responses were very similar, although they were more likely to cite the absence of state services and extremism as issues.

Youth are not satisfied with opportunities in their community for personal growth and development, with 46% reporting that they were "not at all satisfied" compared to only 8% who said that they were "very" or "extremely" satisfied (see Figure 3 below).

**How satisfied are you with the opportunities available in your community for your personal growth and development?**
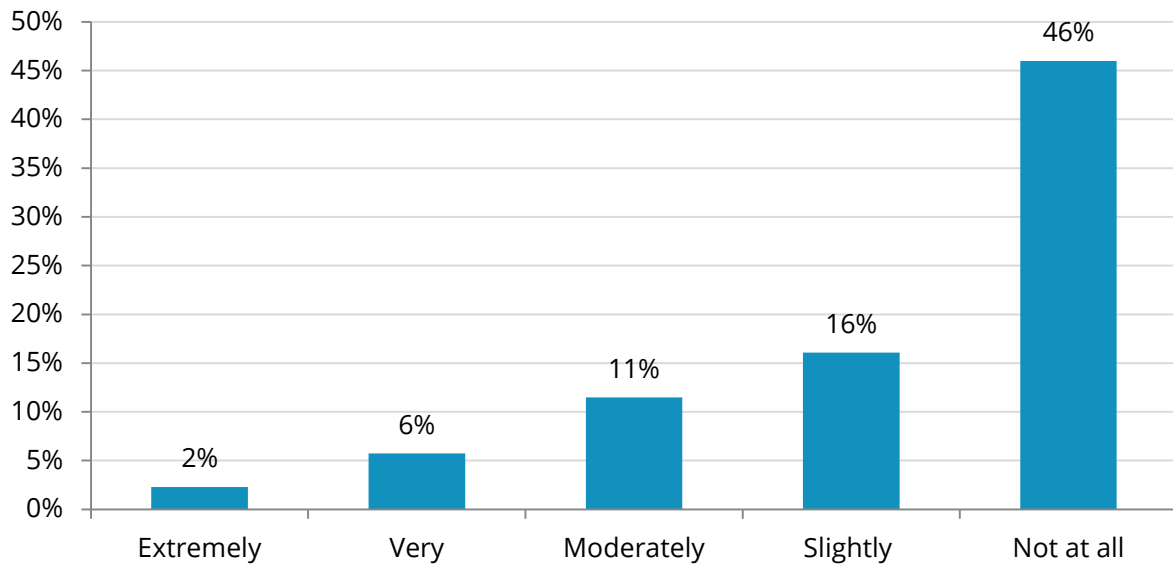


In a related question, youth reported missing the opportunities to have jobs, education and training opportunities, and appropriate infrastructure. Another factor was the lack of support for entrepreneurship.

That being said, youth participants make friends easily, with about two-thirds of male participants strongly agreeing or agreeing in general to the statement, with similar numbers of youth reporting that it is easy for them to seek the support of these friends. However, this was significantly less easy for female participants.

**How often do you feel frustrated about your neighborhood?**
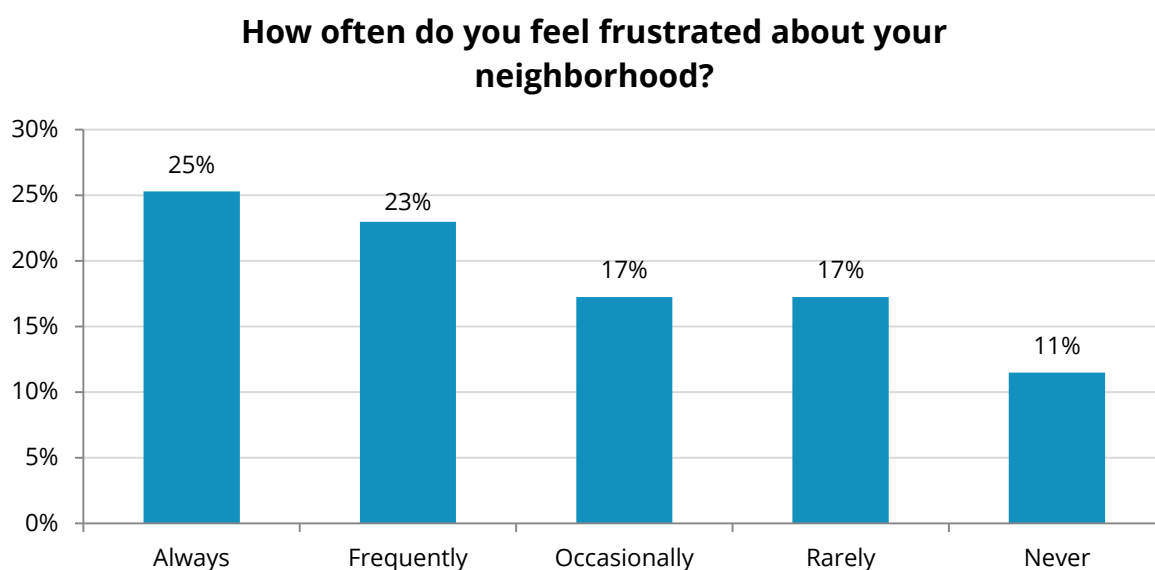


Obviously, the issues above contribute to a growing sense of frustration among Tripoli's youth (see Figure 4 above). Half of the youths surveyed reported being "always" or "frequently" frustrated about their neighborhood (25% and 23%, respectively). When disaggregated by gender, women were revealed to be significantly more frustrated with their neighborhoods. Civil society respondents see this, and reported that the youth of their communities are frustrated, with 21% saying that youth were "always" frustrated and 58% answering "frequently." They largely pointed to economic issues. Interestingly, frustration among youth actually appeared to increase according to increased levels of employment, with 43% of those employed claiming that they were always frustrated compared to 30% of those occasionally employed and 21% of those unemployed.

While this section illuminates the sources of frustration for youth in Tripoli, it remains to be seen how these frustrations might translate into drivers for youth to become engaged in violent extremism.

*Why are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?*

Here, it is important to pause and unpack the idea of drivers of violent extremism. Too often, discussions of the "root causes" of violent extremism focus on structural factors as if they alone can explain the radicalization process. This is not Search's claim here, though many of the participants in this research do seem to accept this idea. Instead, the sources of frustration, tensions, and even conflict discussed below simply expose the issues or local dynamics that violent extremists exploit to draw in recruits. By employing the social movement and contentious politics theories, this research focuses on how violent extremists operating or recruiting in Tripoli might exploit these issues and create or adopt local narratives to frame these issues in ways that create conflicts

with a clear (1) aggrieved/victimized in-group, (2) an enemy or source of the grievance (out-group), and (3) justify specific, violent responses. The case studies below will explore specific instances of social tension and how they may be exploited by violent extremists to drive radicalization and recruitment.

Indeed, violent extremists operating or recruiting in Tripoli have a wide variety of issues to exploit. Among the research participants, over half of the youth respondents answered that local frustrations push youth to behave in negative and unhelpful ways (see Figure 5 below). CSO representatives were substantially more pessimistic about this than youth. Focus group discussants explained what these negative and unhelpful ways might be and frequently cited joining armed groups and violence. Many youths from Jabal Mohsen stated that frustrations lead to "going to Syria" while another answered, "migration and [committing] suicide."

But which frustrations are the most salient in driving youth to engage in violent activities? To this question, about half of the youth cited a lack of opportunities (49%), followed by problems with families and friends (32%), and by seeking respect (18%). Civil society participants were given different answer options in their pre-focus group survey, which took more of the perspective of pull factors rather than push factors, due to the ability to be more explicit with CSO participants. For them, the most frequently cited reason to push youth to engage in violent activities was seeking a form of protection (38%), followed by looking for solutions to problems (29%) and looking for new opportunities that are not available in their own communities (25%). Therefore, participants argued that marginalized youth may see armed and violent extremist groups offering these solutions as appealing.

## Do you believe that local frustrations push young people to behave in negative or unhelpful ways?
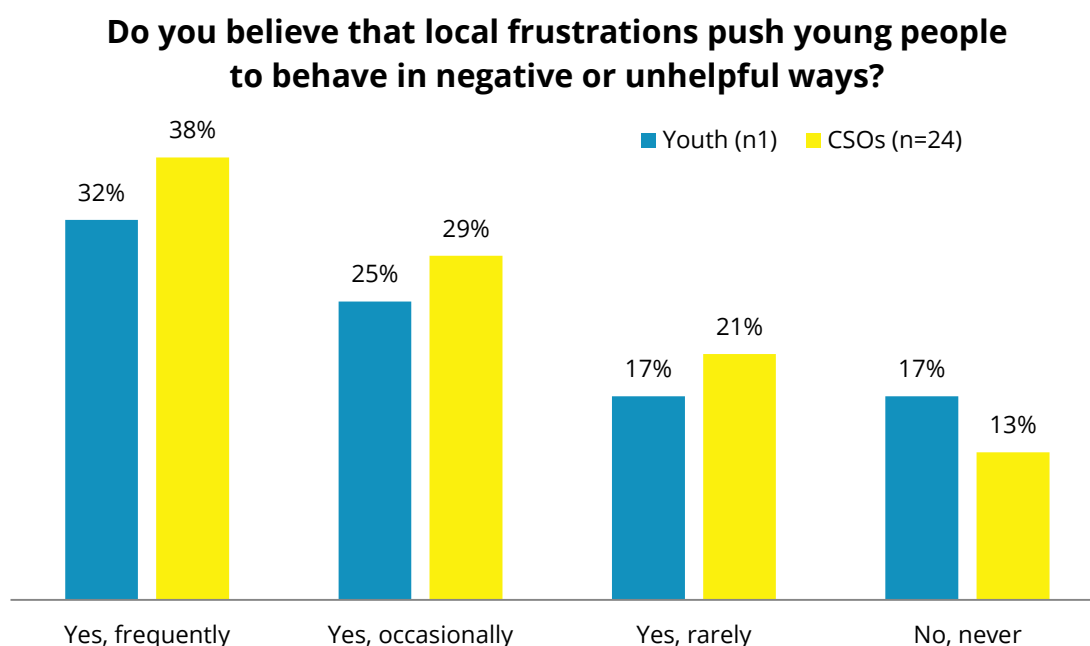


In all discussions about why youth are being radicalized in Tripoli, the number one answer is still economic incentives. This perception is so widely held that it is nearly universal. As one local sports coach who has been exposed to the issue of violent extremism said, "The main reason, and it might seem repetitive, but it is true, is lack of jobs and poverty."

While one might be tempted to dismiss this factor as threadbare, one should instead consider the reasons youth are interested to joining the LAF. Despite being considered a key non-sectarian, unifying national institution in Lebanon (a perspective which is not as universally shared among marginalized youth for reasons which will be explored below), participants in this research did not frame interests in enlisting in the army with motivations of service, national pride, or even to protect their homeland. As one participant explained, "There are many young people in the Lebanese army; this is because they have no other choice. There are people who love the military job. They consider it a fixed job." Many more pointed to the services and offers available to military recruits. Although this perspective was widely held, it was particularly salient among Alawite participants, with one stating, "The greatest ambition of our youth is to enter the army because it offers a lot [...] to the soldier."

If youth are primarily interested in joining Lebanon's most trusted national institution (as stated by the majority of participants) for its economic benefits, the financial benefits of joining violent extremist groups may also form the most salient pull factor.

However, despite this generally accepted position that it is money that is driving violent extremism in Tripoli, the testimonies of participants revealed that there is much more to the phenomenon of violent extremism. For example, one young man from the neighborhood of Aswak Dakhliya next to Bab al-Tabbaneh recounted his own brush with recruitment:

> *People can resort to violence and terrorist organizations for money. In 2007, when I was a young boy (16 years old), I was invited to join one of the organizations for $800. This amount is great for a young man of this age, especially since the Lebanese army soldier has a salary of 500,000 lira ($330). I did not accept to belong to this organization because I don't know its background. My parents were telling me that I should not listen to anyone if I don't know him.*

This example (one of many) betrays the idea that youth join violent extremist groups for money. Instead, this account illustrates that youth weigh a variety of factors when deciding to participate in violent extremism, including the influence of his family (acknowledging that engagement in violent extremist organizations does not equate with radicalization), which inevitably led to him rejecting what he considered to be a great sum of money. Additional considerations, as they often are, may be left unspoken, but can always be part of an individual's calculus.

While jobs were often championed as a panacea to "fix" the problem of radicalization by participants in this research, a minority pushed back on this assumption. For example, one woman working in the CVE space in Tripoli with ex-combatants and vulnerable youth explained that while financial advantages may be a pull factor, this was less so today. "Decreasing levels of unemployment does not necessarily entail lower levels of radicalization," she warned. "It is not the job in itself that helps fight extremism, it is the perspective it gives to the worker, the chance to advance in life and to produce meaning for his life."

> *Decreasing levels of unemployment does not necessarily entail lower levels of radicalization. It is not the job in itself that helps fight extremism, it is the perspective it gives to the worker, the chance to advance in life and to produce meaning for his life.*
> - CVE practitioner

Nevertheless, there is still value in considering economic incentives a factor in a recruit's decision-making calculus. In fact, the relatively crowded (albeit largely unknown) space of armed and violent extremist groups in Lebanon

create what might best be described as a marketplace of violence. That is, once a young man or woman decides to cross the threshold and support or engage in violence or a violent group—whether that process is self-driven or facilitated to some extent by others—that allegiance can be dynamic. Support or engagement can shift from the ideology or group to another for a variety of reasons, including financial. For example, one youth participant recounted how, while sitting in the Wheat Market in Bab al-Tabbaneh, a young man allegedly told them that "he [was] fighting in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh at the same time, according to the politician who pays him more each time."

However, at the core of radicalization and engaging in violent extremism is the cause embraced by the group, and the means it employs to try and achieve this cause. In Lebanon, this can include a variety of internal or external causes, such as another political party or bloc within Lebanon or the regional conflict involving Israel, Palestine, and Syria—given their historical and geographic proximity and influence on Lebanon. No two violent extremist groups are the same in this "marketplace of violence."

In the past, ISIL has been able to dominate the violent extremism space in Lebanon and Syria and according to participants, has disproportionately attracted Tripoli's Sunni Muslim youth compared to other groups. This process was described by many participants, but most characterized it in non-financial terms. As one member of Tripoli's civil society explained, ISIL was able to more strongly appeal to youth wanting to become involved in the Syrian conflict: "After all, we are human, we have feelings. When someone is exposed to a threat, we feel compassion. ISIL came in the region with high means, big cars, and a lot of weapons."

As explained by participants in the research, many youths from Tripoli appear to have joined violent extremist groups like the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (which now goes by the name of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) or ISIL after having first crossed the threshold into supporting or joining other armed groups, such as groups under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) brand.[14] "You had the youth and the FSA," explained one expert. "Some youth went to the FSA, but considered the FSA too weak, like the Lebanese state. They went then to al-Nusra because they thought it was stronger. Then they logically joined ISIL. They are always looking for more action."

While no participants connected the participation of Tripoli's youth in local militias during the Jabal Mohsen/Bab al-Tabbaneh clashes, it remains a compelling (albeit unexplored) theory as a pathway to violent extremism and therefore an important avenue of further research. In fact, one researcher from Tripoli explained to Search that

---

[14] This dynamic was also observed among Syrian youth. See Meg Aubrey et al., "Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria," Research Summary, International Alert, May 2016.

the fear of this very dynamic may have motivated certain politicians to withdraw support for groups participating in the clashes.

Indeed, the worry of inadvertently setting youth on the pathway to join violent extremist groups was even expressed by one sheikh interviewed in Tripoli:

> *We, the moderate opposition to the regime, encouraged and supported the defense of our brothers in Syria," he explained, "but not in this brutal, violent and terrorist way. They [the youth] misunderstood the idea, that there was no existence for ISIL and al-Nusra. There was the Free Syrian Army for the regular army. Most politicians are pro-revolutionary in the face of injustice.*

It is therefore important to focus on the motivations why youth (whether or not they are marginalized) might find appeal in violent extremism. For many of the youth in Tripoli, whether Alawite, Sunni, or Palestinian, the conflict in Syria has been paramount. "A lot of young people were highly motivated by the Syrian cause," one key informant explained. For example, one youth participant, who said that his father prevented his family from meeting him because he was "accused of terrorism" and declared, "Those who support God and the *mujahedeen* in Syria cannot be said to be terrorists!"

Across the focus groups with marginalized youth, young men and women recounted a number of key frustrations, but largely refrained from stating what either drove them or might convince them to engage in violence. When they did, however, these all revolved around a single issue: the defense of their religious identity/family.

One prime example is that of a former combatant from the Aswak Tarabulus neighborhood, who admitted that he was imprisoned for two years for participating in the Jabal Mohsen/Bab al-Tabbaneh clashes but did not consider himself guilty. "I fought against Jabal Mohsen in defense of my area," he recounted.

> *I have no problem going to prison again in return for defending my religion, my faith and the people of my region [....] My family is not only my daughter and my wife—all my family are my family. There are people who died praying in the [al-Taqwa and al-Salam] mosques; it has become a duty to fight.*

Everyone else in the focus group agreed. "[W]hen I saw women and children burning because of the explosion," he continued later, "I went and fought. I would be without honor and without religion if I did not fight."

The way this ex-combatant frames his defense of his actions as a "duty" is important because it echoes the recruitment narratives of Islamist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIL, and Hezbollah. Islamic armed groups usually borrow heavily from Islamic vocabulary on the subject and contend that violent jihad is defensive and therefore a personal religious obligation of every Muslim (*fard al-ayn*) because—as violent extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL argue—the entire Sunni Muslim community (*umma*) is under an existential attack.[15] This idea was exploited and popularized by Abdullah Azzam, a founding member of al-Qaeda (whose name was adopted by Lebanon's al-Qaeda affiliate). Alternatively, civil society participants emphasized that Alawite youth who radicalize usually do not exhibit radical religious beliefs. Throughout Search's conversations with marginalized youth and civil society members in Tripoli, religious content in radicalization narratives was minimal, although their presence is worth noting.

Rather, the following statements made by separate marginalized youth who participated in the focus groups illustrate their emphasis on the defense motif in their rhetoric justifying engaging in violence:

- "When someone is targeting my religion and my faith."
- "When someone is attacking your house, don't you carry the gun?"
- "When the enemy enters the country. When government institutions and security forces also do not exist."
- "I will not fight for $2000; I [will] defend my land in Palestine only [….] We are carrying weapons in return for security of the camp and for the security of Lebanon because we are guests." - young male member of the security committee for the Baddawi Palestinian camp, affiliated with the Fatah Movement.
- "I will have to take up arms to defend my house and my family, but I did not carry the arms before."
- "[To defend my] parents and home. Because there is no state."
- "If your state is against you, how would it help you? I will not defend Lebanon if someone attacks it, but I will defend my land, my home, and my family."
- "When they enter my house, the carrying of arms will be justified."
- "When my brother was going to take up arms against the fighters fighting our region, I was terrified for him; his duty was to defend his area and his family." - young female Sunni participant.

The calls for "defense" by violent extremist groups are strongly connected to historical grievances and violence, and connect to members of the general public, including

---

[15] Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis" Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (February 2014): 781.

potential recruits. As revealed throughout the data collection, Tripoli's Alawite minority is quite conscious of this. One young Alawite woman recalled how this fear was present inside the home and even required women to participate in the defense: "Since we were young, we used to hear our grandmother say, 'They will come at us. They will attack us, and we will throw oil on them.'"

> Since we were young, we used to hear our grandmother say, 'They will come at us. They will attack us, and we will throw oil on them.'
> - Alawite woman

This is true for Sunnis in Tripoli as well. "Some Sunnis have a victimization attitude, and religion is a huge mobilization force," one civil society member said. Despite making up the majority of Tripoli's residents, the city's Sunnis remember the Syrian government's attacks on the city in 1986. Resentment runs deep. However, for Tripoli's most marginalized, the Lebanese state took Syria's place. "The youth of Tripoli grew up with a violent society in general," argued one Sunni sheikh, "which grew up in the Syrian occupation. Awareness was impossible. Everything was forbidden. Every problem was resolved with violence. Even after the Syrian regime went out from Lebanon, the Lebanese regime used the same methods of the Syrian regime." A member of Tripoli's civil society agreed to an extent, citing the "relations between the youth and local authorities" and the state's "aggressiveness" as push factors.

**Weaponizing identity**

Historical and contemporary grievances contribute to the marginalization of Tripoli's youth. For example, Sunni participants pointed to the 1989 Taif Agreement, which effectively ended the Lebanese civil war, and its provision that allowed Hezbollah to retain its weapons under the auspices that it was fighting Israel during its occupation of Lebanon's south until Israel's withdrawal in 2000. Several Sunni participants alleged that Hezbollah incites the Lebanese state to marginalize the country's Sunnis, and criticize its alliance with the Syrian government. Many deplored a double standard as Lebanese groups like Hezbollah and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party are free to go and fight in support of Assad's government while the Sunnis are restricted from doing the same with Syria's opposition. Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination (which resulted in Syria finally

bowing to international pressure and withdrew from Lebanon after 29 years)[16] further contributes to this mind-set and was brought up by many participants.[17]

Many of the youth and civil society participants (both Sunni and Alawite) also decried the "quota system" in the government sector according to sectarian identity, as well as what they perceive to be the sectarian party divisions of cabinet positions and therefore the ministries they govern. Nearly all participants from each sect reported believing that they are underrepresented in government ministries. "My sect has no state jobs in this country," one Alawite participant complained, "so why should I learn?"

The research reveals significant marginalization of Alawites in Tripoli. Alawite participants lamented the limited inclusion of their representatives in the national and local governments. In particular, residents of Jabal Mohsen raised the concern that their neighborhood does not have a hospital, which was a grave concern during the clashes, when the injured were inhibited from being transported to the hospitals due to the ongoing clashes.

An Alawite sheikh interviewed for this research expressed concerns that Alawites seems to shun their religious identity, even (illegally) changing their identification cards to another sect or religion or by parents giving their children Christian names as protection strategies. Despite a substantial sampling of Alawites for this study, most youth participants refused to list Alawite as their religion, with most simply declining to provide an answer on the pre-focus group questionnaire. The Alawite community is even denied their Lebanese citizenship by some: "People consider that we are Syrians," said one Alawite youth. "We are not Syrians."

Religious commitment among marginalized Sunni youth remained a particular avenue of discussion. Some Sunni participants in the research complained that outwardly practicing their religion was conflated with religious extremism and connections to violent extremism, fueling their marginalization in their community. "If he is not religious and becomes religious, they will say it is extremist," complained one Sunni sheikh. "If he is religious and becomes devout, they will say that he is an infidel."

---

[16] "Syrian Troops Leave Lebanese Soil," *BBC News*, April 26, 2005, sec. Middle East, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4484325.stm. Syrian authorities cited UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for all non-Lebanese forces to withdraw from the country, as the reason for the pull-out.

[17] Four members of Hezbollah were later indicted by the Security Council-mandated Special Tribunal for Lebanon ("Hezbollah Leader Nasrallah Rejects Hariri Indictments," *BBC News*, July 3, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14004096.)

The above issues are only a brief sampling of the identity-based issues that contribute to marginalization. Furthermore, violent extremist groups have leveraged these issues to draw support and recruits. In a way, these groups have weaponized identities for their own purposes, pulling both religious and nonreligious recruits to fight for their religion and both politically active and apathetic youth to fight for a political cause. From one neighborhood to another, different pull factors to violence are dominant; in Jabal Mohsen, one CVE practitioner explained, sectarian identity is preponderant whereas in Bab al-Tabbaneh it is religious extremism. Nevertheless, both grant them the feeling to give a certain 'meaning to their lives' and as such as eventual rightful ground to engage in violence.

> *If he is not religious and becomes religious, they will say it is extremist. If he is religious and becomes devout, they will say that he is an infidel.*
>
> *- Sunni sheikh*

Being rooted in one or more of a potential recruit's overlapping identities is not, however, a prerequisite to radicalization. Indeed, regardless of their current adherence to a particular religious or political ideology, they can be drawn to violent extremism not just to defend or express their identity, but to find it. "What can you expect from someone who cannot bring anything, cannot prove his existence, and cannot give anything to anyone?" asked a CVE practitioner in Tripoli. "He joins ISIL because he wants to bring something new, express some sort of force, through violence. He wants to feel alive; here in his neighborhood he is not alive." In this respect, we see how ISIL successfully mobilizes youth not simply by co-opting an existing vocabulary of marginalization and persecution, but by presenting itself as the antidote to both societal and personal victimhood. As explored in the theoretical framework, violent extremist groups connect themselves to the broader identity group and local grievances to draw recruits.

Social and political cleavages may help facilitate this pursuit. For Tripoli's youth, the sense of marginalization is the result of what they perceive as a series of failings by politicians, Lebanese national government and local institutions, the military, the police, religious leaders, and local and international NGOs to address the difficulties they are facing. In the pre-focus group questionnaire, only a few youth or civil society actors reported that youth would easily go to an official institution if they needed help. There was significant distrust for governmental institutions (see Figure 6 below). This was starker with community leaders, with only the police faring in the midrange. For trust in the police, however, young men were more likely to report distrust than young women, a trend with continued across the other institutions. When disaggregated by age, trust in government was lower among the youngest participants.

## Do you think you can trust the following institutions?
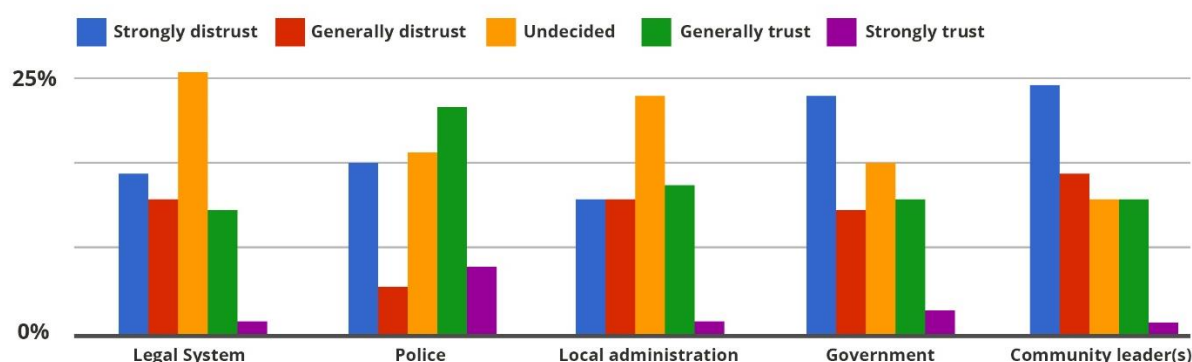


Politicians fared the worst. Throughout the focus group discussions, participants characterized Tripoli's politicians as "starving the people in order to control them." This distrust breeds discontent and hate. As one young man lamented that joining the army was impossible, he declared, "I do not believe in the state. The state money is *haram* [religiously prohibited]."

Distrust of the security services and judicial system in particular were also widely cited as sources of social and political cleavages. Many pointed to the current backlog of prosecutions of Tripoli's youth from who have been accused of communicating with violent extremists or of participating in the clashes and have languished for years in prison.

It becomes clear how such cleavages might drive violent extremism. As one key informant explained,

> *People started to think the Lebanese authority isn't relevant anymore, that it would be more useful to be part of Syria. [...] "I want to defend and protect my house and family," [they say]. They go buy guns and meet people who influence them in a bad way. Every day you see 10, 20 people dying, fear is ever-growing. There is a strong and deep disconnection from the local authorities and official forces.*

For someone in this disconnected space, research participants warned that this makes youth vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment in violent extremist groups.

At this point, it is also important to highlight the widespread accusations by participants that violent extremism is state-sponsored, whether by Lebanon's political factions, its security services, or the governments of countries such as Syria, Israel, or the United

States. Such sentiments are prolific. Tripoli's history and a number of bombings in Lebanon and Tripoli that implicated Syrian officials must be taken into account in any analysis on violent extremism in Lebanon. However, attempting to simply dismiss the phenomenon of violent extremism as a state-driven endeavor does not explain why youth from Tripoli are being drawn to it.

**Leveraging gender**

Markedly, many participants in the research highlighted the important role that gender plays in driving support or engagement in violent extremism.[18] As discussed above, motifs of protection or "defending" one's family or identity group are both salient and powerful to young men. "Violence is the way of showing one's force, his masculinity," one CVE practitioner explained.

Violent extremist groups are conscious of this and employ highly gendered language that targets males feeling powerless (and perhaps 'emasculated') by repression and victimization. They then promise that recruits will be able to reaffirm and amplify their masculinity, becoming 'real men' who perform hyper-masculinized and hyper-militarized gender roles through extremely violent ways. For example, another CVE researcher recounted listening to a sheikh's gendered language from a mosque. "'See what happens in Syria?'" she quoted him as saying. "'Fifteen young women sign up for jihad; you men are doing nothing.'" According to the researcher, by playing on gendered stereotypes, the sheikh would "insult manhood and drag them into terrorism."

Violent extremist groups like ISIL have even leveraged women as a recruitment tool, having instituted sexual slavery of captured women or facilitating marriages of male and female recruits.[19] In comparison, joining the military can be similarly gendered. Many connected the benefits of joining the army to making a young man's prospects for marriage better.

Women are, of course, also subject to the appeal of violent extremism. Violent extremist groups offer women specific benefits and roles for them to participate. As one civil society actor explained, both women and men can be drawn in:

---

[18] For an example of a thorough gender analysis on recruitment strategies, see Dallin Van Leuven, Dyan Mazurana, and Rachel Gordon, "Analysing the Recruitment and Use of Foreign Men and Women in ISIL through a Gender Perspective," in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, ed. Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen (T.M.C. Asser Press/Springer Verlag, 2016), 97–120.

[19] See Amnesty International, "Escape from Hell: Torture and Sexual Slavery in Islamic State Captivity in Iraq," London: Amnesty International, December 2014.

> *Men want to assert their importance in society. They want to show they exist and have an impact on society. The same reasons apply for girls, plus the temptation of transgression of what is forbidden by society. Among women, radicalization is much more discreet, as they go out less often. This is done through social media. Some girls disappear and never come back.*

While most join voluntarily, coercion might also be used, especially for women. For women, this coercion might be highly gendered. As one Sunni participant explained, "There are people who went to Syria as a family. There are women who go in order for her husband not to marry a second wife." CVE practitioners and researchers must, therefore, be conscious of the way violent extremist groups utilize gender (similar to their use of religious rhetoric) to promote violence and recruitment.

**Current trends and changing threats**

Respondents often highlighted that the nature of violent extremism is shifting in Lebanon and that the dynamic of local recruits becoming foreign fighters is diminishing. This has been helped, in part, by the 2014 security plan that ended the clashes. "Now, no one now is ready to take up arms," one participant explained.

Another factor to this decrease has been the shift in the Syrian conflict, with the introduction of regional and international actors – Hezbollah and other militias, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the international coalition against ISIL.

This has stoked fears that those drawn to violent extremism will increasingly represent a domestic threat. "I think that Lebanon has become fertile ground for extremists," described one civil society actor, "because the army has become a 'crusader' army for them [….] Who goes to Syria for jihad, will now come to Lebanon for jihad, because it is not in his ability to go to Syria now." This was even suggested by some youth participants, such as one who said "I will not fight Syria if I want to fight, I will fight in my land." These comments suggest that CVE practitioners must be alert for potential shifts in the violent extremism space in Lebanon.

These changes are likely already underway. Following the offensives that drove out al-Nusra, ISIL, and FSA-branded groups from the Lebanese border region near Ras Baalbek and Arsal in July and August 2017 (by the LAF in concert with Hezbollah and the Syrian government), these groups no longer have safe havens in Lebanon in which to operate. It is too early to tell how these offensives will affect the dynamics of radicalization in Lebanon.

## Which groups of young people in Tripoli are being radicalized?

While Search acknowledges that there is no "profile" of a violent extremist, the focus group discussions and interviews conducted largely reinforced the legitimacy of the selection criteria for marginalized youth as risk factors that increase the vulnerability of youth in Tripoli. The most salient factors are elaborated on below.

**Age**: Many respondents warned that the majority of those who went to Syria to fight were between the ages of 15 to 30, with those under the age of 18 disproportionately represented.

**Statelessness**: Legal regulations in Lebanon require the certification of births, which is made more difficult if such registrations are not done in a timely fashion or the child is born outside a hospital—conditions which especially affect the poor. Such individuals are, in effect, stateless, having no citizenship or identification. These stateless individuals (*maktoumat al-qayd*) are unable to access many government services and, as explained by many interlocutors, sources of increased vulnerability to the appeal of violent extremism.

**History of arrest or other encounters with security services**: Search's conversations with the youth in Tripoli were replete with personal examples of scrutiny and what they described as harassment by Lebanon's security services deployed throughout the city. Many were arrested, with a few spending years in prison. Negative encounters with the ISF and LAF have eroded trust in the military among Tripoli's marginalized youth. Some of the participants alleged that the army was partial to the Shi'a sect; both Alawites and Sunnis complained that religious observance was a particular reason for scrutiny, with one Sunni from the Aswak Dakhliya neighborhood claiming, "I was imprisoned because of my beard." This attention from security services seems to be even more prevalent for Sunnis, with one Alawite civil society actor sharing how he had been arrested and imprisoned in a case of mistaken identity:

> *They accused me of belonging to ISIL. I'm up and saying it publicly: if I were a Sunni, I would not be out of prison yet! There is great injustice. I asked the interrogator, 'I am Alawite, is it logical that you imprison me? How do I belong to ISIL and I am Alawite?*

Once an individual has been imprisoned, the stigma follows with them. "The state is the one who wants the young people to go to Syria because of the restrictions on them," explained Ziad (pseudonym).

Such scrutiny creates cleavages that can drive the appeal to violent extremism. To illustrate, in one focus group discussion with youth (largely from Mankoubin), participants opened up about their negative experiences with the security forces. Ziad related how religious observance invites increased scrutiny and how he had been accused of supporting terrorism and of intending to go "to Syria for jihad" and threatened with imprisonment—an accusation he denied. In frustration, Ziad called the Lebanese state "*kuffar*" (apostate/infidel) and later said, "I want ISIL to come to protect us." Immediately regretting the statement and dismissing it as a joke, Ziad became fearful and withdrew from the session.

**Relationships with violent extremists**: Scrutiny from the security services is exacerbated when individuals are related to violent extremists. When misplaced, such scrutiny can deepen cleavages that may only increase radicalization. One youth participant, whose uncle and two cousins (one male and one female) "went to jihad in Syria," claimed he was threatened with imprisonment and that his friend was imprisoned because his brother was fighting in Syria.

**Previous victimization of violent acts or exposure to violent actions within the home:** The residents of Tripoli's violent memories were also highlighted as a powerful driving factor, whether these violent acts occurred inside or outside the home. Many Alawite and Sunni participants were injured, had their cars destroyed, had their homes damaged or burned due to shelling, or lost loved ones to violence. Such experiences were surprisingly prevalent and brought up emotions of pain, anger, and revenge in the sessions. One young man from the neighborhood of Mankoubin recalled, "Yes, I remember when my grandfather was killed. My mother was crying. I wanted to start the fight again." Others cited such loss as the reason they fought. "In 2013, my uncle died" one participant shared, "my brother (who was 10 years old) and I took his weapon to go down the street and fight."

> *Yes, I remember when my grandfather was killed. My mother was crying. I wanted to start the fight again.*
> *- Male youth, Mankoubin*

These experiences, like the other factors included in the selection criteria, proved to be strong sources of vulnerability for the appeal of violence and violent extremism. While none of these above factors are predictive, however, they serve to highlight vulnerabilities that may help determine which groups of Lebanese in Tripoli might be more likely to be drawn to violent extremism.

## How are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?

Since no predictive profile can be drawn, John Horgan (a researcher on radicalization and violent extremism) suggests that the "elusive search for the root causes of [violent extremism] should give way to efforts to detect routes to extremism, and that instead of trying to identify profiles, terrorism experts ought to concentrate on the pathways to violence."[20] The following pathways were identified:

**Drugs:** Participants collectively claimed that drugs are the predominant tool, including narcotics in pill form. "There are hundreds of ways to drag in youth," one CVE researcher explained. "In Tripoli, they use drugs." One young member of civil society who is involved in the prevention space clarified this, saying that drugs were used to build relationships with potential recruits, who sought drugs as an outlet. The claim was that when the youth become addicted to drugs or in debt, their suppliers coerce them into recruitment to maintain their supply of drugs or to pay off their debt. Indeed, one of the authors attended a participatory theatre performance organized by a group operating in Tripoli for young teenage residents of the city that focused on this very dynamic in order to help build their resilient strategies to radicalization. When the performers paused the performance to ask the youth in attendees if this was occurring in Tripoli, the youth agreed. However, this study was unable to establish sufficient evidence to verify this hypothesis. Other factors may be at play, or drug use may correlate with other negative behaviors that can increase vulnerability to radicalization, such as negative encounters with security forces, imprisonment, engaging in violent or criminal behavior, or becoming a victim of violence or crime. Indeed, a scoping study on substance abuse in Tripoli, released following the data collection for this study, noted that drugs were linked to a number of these high-risk behaviors and also reported key informants' concerns about drugs and radicalization.[21] However, more research is needed to understand how and to what extent these issues are related.

**Social and traditional media:** Unlike other contexts, online radicalization does not appear to be a salient factor in Tripoli. Marginalized youth may not even have significant access to social media. In the pre-focus group survey, youth reported that they use WhatsApp the most, followed by Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Snapchat. Responses from CSO participants matched those of the youth. Female respondents seem to use all social media to a slightly lesser extent than males. Civil society participants themselves did not believe that social media was the most effective format to engage with youth

---

[20] Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," 61, Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development, February 2009, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadt978.pdf.
[21] See Roisin Maire Taylor and Claire McLeod Wilson, "Substance Abuse in Tripoli, Lebanon – Scoping Study Report" (The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterrean Studies, The Fletcher School at Tufts University: November 2017).

(29%) in comparison to 54% who believed that social media should be paired with real-life interaction and 13% who thought in-person interactions were the best format. In other words, the majority believed that social media alone was insufficient to engage with youth. They explained that many youth fear that these platforms are monitored and would avoid this pathway. Others cautioned that even if online outlets to channel frustrations or discuss issues with policymakers were available, youth would not be inclined use them.

That being said, social media does remain an important outlet for disseminating news and narratives that may contribute to feelings of marginalization and collective victimhood, and has proven particularly efficient with youth as it is a young media. A member of the civil society also revealed the existence of WhatsApp groups among Tripoli's youth where they do not discuss but disseminate information. Much of this information, he explained, is fake news meant to invoke feelings of anger and victimization.

**Families:** Families are seen as having a very important role in the radicalization of youth, according to the vast majority of civil society actors we spoke to. Alternatively, the majority also believed that families can help resolve conflicts, highlighting the importance of households. Youth respondents reported that families are critically important to them, with 75% of youth respondents saying that their families are "extremely important" to them—for young women, this response was nearly universal (97%, compared to 63% among young men). Interestingly, the importance of family was positively correlated with higher education levels, meaning that the poorly educated may have more limited family support systems. Youth respondents' families are also quite involved in their lives, especially for young women. The vast majority believe that their families can help resolve conflict.

However, throughout the discussions, participants warned that some families encourage their children to engage with violent extremist groups, or raise their children with radical or sectarian worldviews. If those children perished in the fighting, they said, the families would praise them as martyrs. Yet others cautioned that most parents are often unaware of the radicalization of their children.

**Forcible recruitment:** Coercion may also be another pathway for youth in Tripoli. In the words on one civil society participant, "Some young men are requested to join ISIL by the organization, and they accept because they are even more afraid of being a prisoner of ISIL. They have no money to travel to a safe zone." Once an individual has joined, he may not be able to disengage for fear of death. "I know many people who went to join ISIL," admitted one CVE practitioner, "trying to convince them of coming back is very difficult. They are afraid of being killed by ISIL before reaching the home country."

**Recruiters:** Importantly, the radicalization space in Tripoli is organized. Many youth participants, such as one young man from the neighborhood of Aswak Dakhliya, recalled how they have been approached by people to join violent extremist groups. To what extent violent extremist groups have recruiters in Lebanon is still unknown.

**Politicians:** A widespread perception among participants is that Lebanese politicians facilitate networks to recruit individuals in a variety of local, foreign, or violent extremist armed groups. These armed groups, they allege, are to forward their personal or political agendas. "Street leaders [in Tripoli] have a very big influence—completely informal networks that bypass formal justice structures," explained one CVE practitioner. "Some young and influential sheikhs are directly paid by political leaders to attract youth, 'brainwash them' in order to gain popular support." Whether or not these accusations are true, their prevalence helps to explain the widespread distrust of political leaders.

**Religious leaders:** Finally, many pointed to religious leaders as (perhaps the most powerful) facilitators of radicalization through individual interactions or (religious and political) sermons. Whether or not this perception is accurate, religious leaders may promote views or narratives which unintentionally encourage youth to support or engage in violent extremism. Indeed, this was admitted to by one sheikh interviewed by Search, who lamented that local support for the Syrian opposition had led youth to pathways that progressed to violent extremism:

> *We were with the 'Intifada' [against the Syrian government] to support the young Muslims in Syria, but our young minds are weak, easy to persuasion. They [violent extremists] have attracted the minds of young people to another way—an unexpected way. The stage has been reached that they [incite] people against the state and said that the [Lebanese] state is an infidel!*

It is helpful to note that participants shared a number of pathways that prevented violence or prevented them from being drawn to violent extremism. One Alawite participant, for example, said that he tried to go to fight in Syria, but was prevented by his friends. Others shared how friendships that spanned the Alawite-Sunni divide were used to prevent violence or free captives. Examples were also given of how community members intervened to end or prevent the outbreak of violence.

*Where are young people in Tripoli being radicalized?*

Civil society respondents named open public or private spaces, such as coffee shops and sports centers (i.e. football fields), as places where youth gathered to socialize in the pre-focus group questionnaires. Other places, like association offices, were mentioned only by a handful of people. Mosques were only mentioned by two. As these areas tend to skew towards being male-dominated spaces, it begs the question as to whether young women have alternative spaces for socializing which were not shared through the survey, and therefore might be overlooked.

Paradoxically, in regards to radicalization, civil society participants felt that youth are most at risk of being approached by violent groups in houses of worship (33%), followed by universities and social functions (25% each). When combined with the findings from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews, the following insights as to where youth in Tripoli were being radicalized were revealed:

**Neighborhoods:** The seven key neighborhoods in the research were largely reaffirmed by participants as hotspots of radicalization, with Bab al-Tabbaneh being noted most frequently. Mankoubin and Jabal Mohsen were also mentioned as key areas. Jabal Mohsen presented a unique case on two levels. First, many Alawite youth participants from the neighborhood expressed interest in recruitment, confessed to engaging with armed groups, or having been approached for recruitment in Tripoli or Syria. Second, though it is a predominantly Alawite neighborhood, there is a significant number of Sunni residents in Jabal Mohsen—who are at an increased risk of radicalization. However, numerous accounts of radicalization by marginalized youth participants outside the seven target areas caution practitioners from focusing solely on those areas; radicalization is a widespread problem and is not isolated geographically.

**Homes:** As demonstrated in the section above, families were seen as having a very important role in the radicalization of youth by the vast majority of civil society respondents, including its prevention. It is apparent, therefore, that radicalization may disproportionately occur in the home compared to other places.

**Mosques:** Many respondents cited mosques as places where radicalization is occurring, including at one who recalled how he was approached and asked "to join them for jihad." However, many cautioned that radicalization might actually occur in peripheral spaces of mosques or in informal religious spaces, or that (as discussed above) support for the Syrian opposition or other political causes may not have been intended to encourage listeners to join violent extremist groups.

**Informal spaces:** One researcher respondent, instead, pointed to cafes adjacent to mosques as areas of recruitment, where worshippers gather following Friday prayers or

after early morning prayers when the police are not there. Another practitioner pointed to informal religious spaces (*majlis*), where young (often informal) sheikhs can preach more discreetly, "spreading misinformation." While violent extremist groups may utilize these religious spaces as well as a religious vocabulary of contention (i.e. words like *haram*, *kuffar*, and *jihad*,), the above discussion has revealed that their appeals are mostly revolved around local or political issues framed by identity. As established by the theoretical framework, violent extremist groups are adept at co-opting religious vocabulary just as well as they are at embedding themselves in local conflicts and contentions.

Other participants stressed that radicalization can occur in any place, especially those that are informal or private; there is no specific location. For example, one civil society participant recounted how their son told them of a coach at a sports club who was "inciting young people" and talking to them "about matters of religion and the issue of war in Syria." They prevented their child from going there again.

### *Analysis*



*The Lebanese Armed Forces is often seen as the nation's bellwether institution. But for marginalized and radicalized youth in Tripoli, it can be a symbol of oppression and marginalization. Photo by lead author.*

The violent extremism space in Tripoli is complex, with a variety of local and transnational groups that co-opt a variety of political, ideological, and religious identities. Indeed, as Search's conversations with Alawite and Sunni youth and members

of civil society revealed, both Alawite and Sunni youth in Tripoli are suffering from significant levels of marginalization. A variety of factors, including ineffective or non-existent services and opportunities from government and local institutions as well as scrutiny and abuse by security services, create deep cleavages for many of these communities. These divides foster a feeling of rootlessness in Lebanon, which may be amplified by eroding trust in formal institutions (including the national bellwether institution of the military), political and personal apathy, hopelessness, and drug use. In turn, extremist groups capitalize on this erosion of trust, by promising an alternative social structure from which to overcome these collective grievances.

Tripoli's residents often feel like they are at the frontlines of a larger struggle between forces beyond the city. These frustrations appear to make some feel completely disconnected from the Lebanese state, preferring to identify with more insular religious or political groups. For others, frustrations may lead individuals to seek an identity that better resonates with who they are or who they want to be.

The tragic and yet intriguing results of these dynamics in Tripoli are the unique but parallel pathways that lead some of Tripoli's Alawite and Sunni youth to violence and violent extremism. That is, while a small but significant number of both Alawite and Sunni youth have clashed with each other or have been drawn to fight in Syria for different sides, they have largely done so for very similar reasons: to "defend" their identity group, to pursue a new or renewed identity, or to be part of something larger than themselves—giving their lives new meaning.

Of course, no two individual pathways are the same, nor is there any 'formula' to create a violent extremist. Furthermore, the current dynamics are ever-changing, with trends from only a couple years ago already invalid. Considering the Syrian conflict's powerful influence on the dynamics of radicalization in Tripoli, and the fact that the conflict is constantly changing and will inevitably end, CVE researchers and practitioners in Lebanon should be able to analyze rising trends and local sources of tension that may also lead to new waves or forms of violent extremism in order to prevent future violence. Therefore, the following case studies explore recent incidences of social tension to illuminate how the dynamics explained above may have fueled contention which then presented an opportunity for violent extremist groups to influence relationships and reframe the issues in Lebanon.

## Case Studies

Participants from the first phase of the research revealed a number of particularly salient drivers of marginalization and radicalization in Tripoli: vengeance for real or perceived crimes, 'defending' one's family or community, abuse by security services or their perceived ineffectiveness at protecting citizens, scrutiny for expressing one's

religious identity or insults to it, and a lack of sufficient services or livelihood opportunities. Therefore, Search identified three of the most significant events in Tripoli that illustrate contemporary examples of events that created these dynamics in order to better understand how such events could result in driving marginalization and radicalization: (1) The 2013 bombings of the al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques, (2) the 2012 release of a film defamatory to the Prophet Mohammed and Islam, and (3) the 2016 reductions and changes to benefits to Palestinians by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Unlike Phase I, Phase II focused on specific events, including incidents of victimization. Gathering participants willing to discuss them was somewhat more difficult. For example, stakeholders from the security services declined to participate in the research. Moreover, local judges told field researchers that they could not participate without the approval of parliament. In addition, many participants were reluctant to discuss religious issues for the second case study, with many focus group discussants withdrawing, citing additional concerns that they did not want to be connected to the protests.

Despite these challenges, the success of the case study approach was revealed in the fact that discussing these events allowed for intense discussions on issues that highlight and demystify some of the dynamics of radicalization explained above. For example, while Palestinian youth in the first phase of the research avoided discussing contemporary social issues ("We support only the Palestinian cause," one declared, "Let us solve our case first and then go to think about another issue."), the third case study opened up participants in Phase II to discuss a variety of related issues. The following sections are brief syntheses of the results of Phase II, which highlight institutional drivers of violent extremism.

### Case Study 1: The 2013 bombings of the al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques

**Background**

On August 23, 2013, worshippers attending Friday prayers in Tripoli's al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques became the victims of coordinated car bombings. The Lebanese Red Cross reported that over 500 were injured in the explosions, and 47 people died.[22] As citizens and rescue workers attended to the dead and wounded, some shouted accusations. Others, firing AK-47s into the air, assembled outside the al-Taqwa mosques blast site as some individuals threw rocks at Lebanese soldiers nearby.[23]

---

[22] "Scores Dead in North Lebanon Twin Blasts," *Al Jazeera English*, August 24, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/08/201382311249855388.html.
[23] Oliver Holmes and Nazih Siddiq, "Bombs Kill 42 Outside Mosques in Lebanon's Tripoli," *Reuters*, August 23, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-explosion-deaths-idUSBRE97M0FL20130823.

**Findings**

The bombings instantly eroded Tripoli's already fragile social cohesion. Tripoli's Alawites were immediately blamed for the attack, though many Sunni participants in the research made sure to reject collective judgments against the entire religious community, quoting scriptural prohibitions against collective guilt. Nevertheless, tensions ran high. In the words of one female participant whose husband was killed and son was injured in one of the mosques, "This crime is the reason for a revolution, especially in Lebanon." She went on to say that this "revolution" among the youth (perhaps referring to protests or the subsequent clashes) was small and ended after a short period of time. Another victim, wounded in one of the blasts, admitted that these bombings "contributed to the increase of extremism." A member of civil society agreed, adding that "the extremism of young people is more dangerous than the extremism of the [older generation], because [they] think while the young man takes action. The idea of extremism in the thought of young people was confirmed after the bombing." Indeed, the bombings of the mosques were cited by one participant as his reason for participating in violent clashes against Jabal Mohsen, for which he was imprisoned. Furthermore, one civil society participant shared how both young men and women told him, "We want to blow ourselves up to get rid of this social distress" of the city. When pressed by another participant as to whether he was speaking metaphorically, he confirmed the threats were real.

The rift between Tripoli's Sunni and Alawite communities was palpable. Rifa'at Eid, the leader of the Alawite Arab Democratic Party (ADP), had appeared on television and asked his supporters to donate blood to the victims. "But no one dared," said one of the victims of the bombings, adding, "We advised them not to." A local official even recalled how he helped to organize armored escorts with the LAF to transport Alawite university students to Jabal Mohsen. While Tripoli's residents took charge of clearing the rubble and reopening the roads after the bombing, many noted the absence of Tripoli's Alawites, who were too fearful of revenge attacks to come. However, one interlocutor who helped organize the clean-up noted that a number of people living near the al-Taqwa Mosque who were working in "mixed associations" came to help, which included a number of Alawites—albeit discreetly.

This fear was not unfounded, unfortunately. In the following days and weeks, masked men riding motorcycles targeted pedestrians they believed to be Alawite, shooting them in the legs. In one case months later, six residents of Jabal Mohsen were kidnapped from a van, marched off, and shot in the feet.[24] These seemingly random (albeit targeted) attacks caused a great deal of fear among Tripoli's Alawite residents, but the danger only became more organized. "A violent movement was born," said one civil

---

[24] "Tripoli Figures Condemn Bus Attack as Al-Tabbaneh Cleric Defends Taking Matters into Own Hands," *Naharnet*, November 3, 2013, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/104220.

society participant, describing an al-Nusra/ISIL cell in Bab al-Tabbaneh that allegedly eventually grew to "50 armed men" before the cell was raided by security forces and its members arrested.[25]

Rumors and accusations exacerbated tensions. Syria's government and leaders from the ADP were "charged at the first moment," according to one participant. Others blamed the United States of America or Israel for perpetrating the mosque bombings. One civil society focus group participant claimed that the masked gunmen carrying out random shootings on Alawites were sponsored by Lebanon's own security services. Indeed, accusations that various security services were behind violent extremism were replete throughout Search's interviews and focus groups throughout Lebanon.

Historical grievances granted accusations of Syria's involvement salience and credibility. Research participants cited the case of Michel Samaha, a Lebanese Christian and former minister who was convicted in 2012 of smuggling explosives into Lebanon with the intent to commit attacks on political and religious leaders—allegedly on behalf of Syria's government.[26] In addition, many referenced previous violence in Tripoli, arguing that "the same people who committed the massacre in 1987 committed the crime of the mosques, so it is the duty of the Alawite society to get rid of these criminals." Traditional and social media helped to spread these rumors, which only grew when, just one week later, a number of prominent Sunni sheikhs who supported the Syrian government and Syrian officials were indicted over the bombings.[27]

However, many of Tripoli's residents actively tried to soothe tensions and prevent violence, responding positively to the crisis. A Christian priest as well as a sheikh who participated in the research recounted how the neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen held many community activities the week of the bombing. "The goal," the sheikh said, "was to minimize the consequences of the bombing. This harmony has increased," he contended, "has not changed, was not affected and did not retreat." In addition, over a thousand residents of Tripoli arrived at the scenes in the days after the bombings to clean up the rubble. Moreover, an association, named after the two mosques, was founded in order to provide relief and conduct community activities.

---

[25] ISIL"s violent split with other Syrian opposition groups did not occur until late 2013/early 2014.

[26] "Ex-Minister Michel Samaha Sentenced to 13 Years in Prison with Hard Labor," *The Daily Star*, April 8, 2016, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Apr-08/346333-former-lebanon-minister-michel-samaha-sentenced-to-13-years-in-prison-in-terror-case.ashx.

[27] "Lebanese Clerics Charged over Deadly Tripoli Bombings," *BBC News*, August 30, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23903366. Additional indictments for crimes related to the bombings continued for years with some trials ending in exonerations and others ongoing, but the focus of this case study was on the initial events.

These actions contrast with respondents' perceptions regarding the response of government officials. Concerns included poor services to the injured and the fact that it was average citizens – not the municipality – that cleared the rubble. Some civil society associations were also criticized for only taking pictures for publicity. Politicians and officials bore the brunt of participants' criticism, who accused various politicians for inciting more strife by making statements that "generate[d] violence and problems." Others saw the government's response as only talk: "The state solved the issue through the statements; [it] did not meet people and gather them. Everyone made statements from all regions." Finally, respondents complained of the slow process to try those accused in connection to the bombings, especially while thousands of young Sunnis languished in prison as well.

> " *The state solved the issue through the statements; [it] did not meet people and gather them. Everyone made statements from all regions.* "

## Analysis

The tragic events of August 23, 2013 resulted in far more damage than the scores of deaths and hundreds injured in the explosions. As can be seen above, the violence contributed to significant erosions of social cohesion and public trust, which resulted in long-term gaps between citizens and formal institutions seemingly unable to bring the accused to justice or protect innocent civilians targeted in the aftermath. These events were a strong driver of radicalization in Tripoli, with hardline and violent extremist groups promising retaliation or recruiting fighters and supporters calling to 'defend' one's community or religion. For example, recall the words of one FGD participant, who was imprisoned for participating in the subsequent clashes:

> " *I fought against Jabal Mohsen in defense of my area. I have no problem going to prison again in return for defending my religion, my faith and the people of my region [....] My family is not only my daughter and my wife—all my family are my family. There are people who died praying in the [al-Taqwa and al-Salam] mosques; it has become a duty to fight.* "

On the other hand, positive results from this case study include the helpful responses of average citizens, religious leaders, and civil society, many of whom came together to reject violence and respond to the crisis. "One of the most important positive results," said one local official, "is the solidarity of civil society and people." However, as

demonstrated by the overwhelming fear of revenge attacks, these efforts were not in and of themselves enough to allay the fears of Tripoli's Alawite residents or sufficiently protect them, encouraging further cycles of violence—especially since similar events can happen again, as demonstrated by the ISIL plot, thwarted in August 2017, to attack Tripoli's Grand Mansouri Mosque.[28] More efforts, including more effective government responses, would be needed in such times of crisis.

### Case Study 2: The 2012 release of a film defamatory to the Prophet Mohammed and Islam

**Background**

Following the YouTube release of a film insulting the Prophet Mohammed and Islam, angry residents in Tripoli protested on 14 September 2012. One of these protests escalated into riots which resulted in the burning of a local KFC restaurant. One protester was killed in clashes with security forces when protesters tried to storm a government building.[29] Coinciding with Pope Benedict's visit to Lebanon, chants from the protest also included, "We don't want the pope!"

Although the 2012 protests were short-lived, they fall within a larger pattern of protests and tensions caused by incitement against religious principles. Indeed, despite this case study's focus, many respondents drew connections to other incidents, such as protests over the 2005 release of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed by the Danish publication Jyllands-Posten as well as a number of local controversies. While these other events are outside the initial scope of the case study, these departures were actually helpful in illuminating the core issue and strengthened the case study as intended.

**Findings**

For Tripoli, already a city experiencing waves of violence between Jabal Mohsen and its adjacent neighborhoods, the YouTube film came at a bad time. Thankfully, violence in the protests was minimal, with protests scattered across the city, limiting the worst of the destruction to the KFC. However, previous protests after the release of inflammatory cartoons in 2005 created a diplomatic crisis for Lebanon the following year after the Danish Embassy was attacked and burned in the Christian-majority neighborhood of Ashrafieh in Beirut. At least 18 people were injured, prompting the Lebanese interior minister to resign.[30] Many of the research participants attended the demonstration, which was held on 5 February 2006. In both cases, protests had been organized in order to protest the irreverent depictions of the Islamic prophet—and

---

[28] "Would-Be Bombers of Tripoli Mosque Indicted," *The Daily Star*, August 15, 2017, sec. Lebanon News.
[29] Nazih Siddiqi and Erika Solomon, "One Killed in Lebanon Protest over Anti-Islam Film, Pope," *Reuters*, September 14, 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-protests-lebanon-idUSBRE88D0PR20120914.
[30] "Danish Embassy in Beirut Torched," *BBC News*, February 5, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4682560.stm.

soon got out of hand. Participants in both protests decried what they called "anarchists" or an unknown "third party" for causing the violence. "Those who burned the restaurant are criminals who have nothing to do with Islam," argued one of the attendees.

That sheikh, affiliated with Dar al-Fatwa (which called for the 2006 protests), found himself going from leading the protests of Muslims who "felt humiliated" to shutting it down. "I was [one of] the defenders of the embassy because we felt that there was something suspicious about the people who were participating in the demonstration, [some of whom had] sticks and iron chains." In 2012, another sheikh who had been attending a nearby protest arrived at the KFC and discovered that the protest was turning violent. He recounted how he had allegedly called an internal security official and asked him, 'Let me intervene to stop the burning.'" However, he had one condition: "'But I want you to protect me,'" the Salafi sheikh requested, "'so that the media does not say that the 'Salafis' are the ones who rule Tripoli.'" That request was denied. However, it is unclear whether the sheikh (although a prominent religious figure in Tripoli) would have had more success than the other sheikh in preventing the burning of the embassy and the rioting and looting in Ashrafieh.

Participants explained why the 2012 protests might have gotten out of hand. "The news spread among the people in Tripoli in a very fast way," said one civil society actor, whom he claimed acted before even seeing the offensive cartoons because they "targeted a moral person among the Muslims, which is the symbol of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed. The people in Tripoli do not think about the results, they think about the event and the incident that occurred." Of course, participants also shared how these events may have also been exacerbated by the fact that the offensive material had been produced by non-Muslims.

In addition, many participants argued that this kind of insult from a group or individual outside the offended community may even have a unifying effect on the target community. However, one interesting cleavage was revealed through the discussions: many of the Sunni participants criticized the Shi'a community for not participating in the protests. They pointed to what they argued was an inconsistency, citing examples of protests and even the burning or ransacking of Lebanese television stations when they make caricatures of Lebanese Shi'a figures such as Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nusrallah or Sayyid Musa al-Sadr.[31]

Surprisingly, one of the findings of this case study is that such events may help create intra-religious tensions. These tensions were exacerbated by unfounded rumors, such as one before the scheduled 2006 demonstration which claimed that elements of the pro-Syrian March 8 Coalition (which includes Hezbollah) would participate and "provoke

---

[31] Ellen Francis and Alaa Kanaan, "Protesters Attack Lebanese TV Channel Headquarters," *Reuters*, February 15, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-protests-idUSKBN15T2R7.

riots to disrupt the relationship between Sunnis and Christians" and their respective leaders, alleged one sheikh. "So I say that the March 8 team wanted to [create] sedition between Muslims and Christians."

Another interesting finding was that many participants blamed the media (including social media) for sharing and disseminating the stories, claiming that people would not have known about the offensive materials if the 'instigating' media had simply not reported them. Alternatively, one official actually credited social media for possibly helping to reduce the backlash, giving youth a different outlet.

Many participants criticized Lebanon's security forces for not intervening to stop the violence, the stone throwing, or for tear gassing the religious elders who were trying to protect the embassy and neighborhood.

One participant credited some political figures for preventing further violence, especially from Christian residents of Ashrafieh who might have intervened to defend their shops during the rioting. In fact, one of the sheikhs praised the Christian politician Samir Geagea by name for imploring his supporters to not be drawn into the violence and to forgive. The sheikh also claimed to successfully prevent rioters from attacking a church. Many religious leaders appeared to actively try to prevent violence. For example, when the rioting broke out in 2006, Dar al-Fatwa called on protesters to return to their homes. One civil society participant shared how the Sunni religious body later "issued an order not to give a sermon causing strife and the mobilization of people and increasing their enthusiasm."

**Analysis**

The many events (including those beyond the two demonstrations focused on above) discussed as part of this case study revealed that community cleavages can be created quickly. Participants in the initial phase of the research cited protecting one's religion as a legitimate reason to engage in violence. More than one interviewed for this case study argued that such events drive radicalization as well. Perhaps the most important findings, however, are that (1) political and religious leaders can have stabilizing effects to defuse tensions and subsequent violence and that (2) these effects can be limited by rumors, distrust, and emotions. A strong picture presented by these events is that of religious leaders and citizens exercising their rights to protest, but in the end being subject to the unpredictability of these limiting factors. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that the capacities of social, political, and religious leaders to prevent violence (and therefore violent extremism as well) can be enhanced and supported.

*Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, like Tripoli's Baddawi camp, are home to around tens of thousands of Palestinians who lack Lebanese citizenship or access to most occupations. "*Beddawi Street III*" (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) by* WBUR

**Background**

In mid-December 2015, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) made adjustments to its support for educational services and medical aid which came into effect the beginning of 2016. Schools were forced to close, and classes had to combine, increasing in size. Facing growing budget constraints, UNRWA moved to end support for Palestinians with Lebanese nationality, require 5-15% cost sharing rates to secondary treatment while shifting coverage for surgeries and tertiary care in private hospitals. Protests erupted in Baddawi and across Lebanon, forcing the closure of UNRWA offices. One man even set himself ablaze in Lebanon's south in protest.[32] The pressure was partially successful in pressuring UNRWA to create a separate fund to support the most vulnerable with the help of additional funding. In a

---

[32] Mohammed Zaatari, "Man Sets Himself on Fire Due to UNRWA Cuts," *The Daily Star*, January 13, 2016, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Jan-13/331605-man-sets-himself-on-fire-due-to-unrwa-cuts.ashx.

statement, UNRWA asked for the local and international communities to recognize the feelings of "neglect, marginalization, the profound anxieties, and the denial of rights and absence of future prospects" that had been expressed, but called for an end to "threats and closures" which affected beneficiaries.[33]

**Findings**

The benefit of this case study was apparent in the sense that it indirectly drew out discussions on a range of pressing issues beyond the central event. This contrasted with the FGD with Palestinian youth from the Baddawi camp in the initial research phase, during which participants avoided discussing issues outside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through the data collection for this case study, participants revealed that Palestinian reluctance to discuss Lebanese issues heralds from a 2005 decision, following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, to maintain neutrality in domestic Lebanese affairs—while the rest of the country's political parties sorted themselves into the March 8 and March 14 coalitions. The decision is rooted in an even longer history, with many Lebanese blaming Palestinians in the country for triggering the civil war. While these tensions continue, many credited the formation of the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee in 2007 for strengthening relations.

Despite many Palestinian participants' assertions, as in the words of one participant, that "there has been no disagreement between the Palestinian people [and Lebanon] since the days of the Lebanese civil war," this topic was able to expose specific cleavages amongst Palestinians and between Palestinians and Lebanese beneficial to this study.

The first was that Palestinians in Tripoli still remember the effects of the 2007 Nahr al-Bared camp conflict, which effectively razed a large part of the Palestinian camp as the LAF moved to route the violent extremist group Fatah al-Islam from it. One hundred fifty-eight soldiers died in the fighting.[34] Despite the passing of ten years and commitments by the Lebanese state and UNRWA to rebuild the camp, the majority of the construction has yet to be completed. "If people knew that there would be a delay in the reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared camp," one participant told Search, "we would have never [left]." Nevertheless, nearly all participants said that in spite of the conflict, they were thankful for the LAF's intervention to rid the camp of the group and claimed that the military was the Lebanese institution with which they had the best relationship. However, as expressed by many of the marginalized youth interviewed by Search, this may not be true for some of the Baddawi camp's youth. As one participant a, member

---

[33] "Launch of a Complementary Hospitalisation Fund in Lebanon," *UNRWA*, February 26, 2016, https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/launch-complementary-hospitalisation-fund-lebanon.
[34] Hussein Dakroub, "Three-Month Battle Ends as Army Takes over Refugee Camp," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2007, sec. World news, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/sep/03/syria.lebanon.

of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), cautioned, "Palestinian youth do not accept entry of the state to the camps and control of the camps."

A second gap in Palestinians' relationship with the Lebanese state is the marginalization they feel from limitations on the rights, services, opportunities, and employment opportunities available to them. Many participants cited the standing prohibition to work in a wide variety of fields without special work permits, including the NGO sector, as reasons for marginalization and poverty. One participant complained that Palestinians could not build homes, and could not even bring tombstones into the camp because they were considered a building material, which are prohibited from being brought into the camp.

Gaps in community relations are not limited to the Palestinian-Lebanese dynamic. "I do not hear about problems between the Lebanese society and the Palestinian society," another participant from the DFLP said. "On the contrary, I hear about problems among the Palestinian society itself." Many participants referenced Lebanon's 1994 decision to extend citizenship to Palestinian refugees from seven villages along its southern border, which one characterized as a move to claim its sovereignty over the region. No participants mentioned the fact that these naturalized Palestinians are largely Shi'a Muslims (in contrast with the majority of Palestinians in Lebanon), confirming that this divide revolves around status, and not sectarianism. Many participants demanded to be made naturalized citizens as well.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the impact of the influx of Palestinian Syrians, displaced yet again, but disagreed whether this might have negative repercussions. Most argued that the effect is felt more by the Lebanese. Some (including one local Lebanese official) argued that the money these new refugees brought was an economic boon, while others identified the difference in services offered to Palestinians had in Syria compared to what is provided in Lebanon as a potential source of frustration.

Regarding the cuts and changes to aid, Palestinian participants highlighted the additional strains they place on families. The vast majority lamented that drug use has exploded across the Baddawi camp as a result of increasing poverty. One participant from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP, which is listed as a designated terrorist organization by entities such as the United States and the European Union) recounted leading an armed raid to capture a wanted person who, upon arrest, described the so-called "ISIL pill" (incredibly cheap and supposedly made in Syria) as a drug that causes the user to "see people as insects" and makes them violent. The participant also admitted that drugs were being manufactured in the camp.

The budget cuts also resulted in fewer jobs, overcrowded classrooms, and, as one UNRWA employee admitted (a Palestinian himself), further delays in payments to

beneficiaries, some of which dated back to 2013. He raised the concern that this might lead to violent extremism, giving the example of recruits to ISIL, who he said had been "subjected to injustice and whose identity and history have been erased." A Palestinian sheikh was particularly worried about the effects on the youth. "Today's young generation," he asserted, "has nothing to lose; the young man will not be afraid of death. The reduction of services is one of the causes of these problems."

Largely, the community's response has been peaceful protests, which many pointed out were not suppressed because they were inside the camps. However, the DFLP participant warned that "violence will increase and the marginalization of society will increase" and that riots may result: "Some bad people may break UNRWA offices because they have reduced their services." One Palestinian sheikh, who participated in the protests, warned that violence may lie ahead: "I think that the situation is going to be a big bang. And if the situation breaks out, I do not think the things will be fixed so easily."

**Analysis**

Search's discussions reveal the concerns and narratives of a marginalized population when facing decisions that exacerbate poor conditions. Although UNRWA's 2016 cuts led to protests and tragic incidents of self-harm, violence was largely avoided. Participants attributed the non-suppression of the protests (which may have led to violent clashes) to the Lebanon's security forces' policy of not entering the camps. While this may have avoided aggravation, the policy is a concern shared by authorities and experts, who worry that the camps can be vulnerable hotspots for violent extremism activity, such as when Fatah al-Islam overtook Nahr al-Bared and clashed with the LAF outside of Tripoli in 2007. Lebanon's Palestinian camps may have been granted a short reprieve, however. In the time following the data collection for this study, Bilal Badr – the leader of a violent extremist group that was based in Saida's Ain el-Hilweh camp – and perhaps as many as 25 of his followers left Lebanon for Syria (to fight Assad's government) or elsewhere due to pressure from Palestinian groups and Lebanon's security forces.[35]

However, it is important to note that this case study did not reveal direct linkages between the cuts to UNRWA (nor the general conditions of the camp) and radicalization. While Lebanese Palestinians have been involved in violent extremist groups in Lebanon, such as one of the suicide bombers that attacked the Iranian embassy in Beirut in 2013 or those in the Fatah al-Islam or Bilal Badr groups, this research has not been able to determine to what extent general aid policy or rapid changes thereof have had on radicalizing Palestinians in Lebanon.

---

[35] Najia Houssari, "Palestinian Fugitive Announces He Is in Syria," Arab News, January 3, 2018, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1218016/middle-east.

Yet perhaps the most interesting results of this case study were the narratives and rumors as to why the cuts were made. The widespread statement reported to Search is that "UNRWA is the only witness to the plight of the Palestinians." Therefore, many argued that the reductions were a plot (led by Israel) to end UNRWA and permanently block Palestinians' return to their homeland. These rumors were only bolstered by the Israeli prime minister's recent call to close the UN organization.[36] In the context of contentious politics, these narratives and rumors show how decisions like these can become events that either reaffirm or shift them as well as the divisions they promote.

This case study's findings also provide a warning, as Lebanon's first comprehensive census of Palestinians in Lebanon was completed at the end of 2017.[37] The data and needs assessed will inform both Lebanon and UNRWA's aid strategies.[38] The census' methodology,

> *UNRWA is the only witness to the plight of the Palestinians.*

significance, and results may also create future tensions as new strategies begin. The process had been plagued by political resistance and budget shortfalls.[39] Subsequent events are also presenting further and changing challenges. In the time following the data collection for this study, the United States decided to withhold $65 million from UNRWA in early 2018, eventually terminating its entire financial support in August 2018. Because the United States was UNRWA's largest donor, supplying nearly 30% of UNRWA's budget, these cuts have hit the agency hard. Therefore, policymakers and civil society actors should be prepared to obviate issues and tensions which may result from the treatment of Palestinians and reductions in their aid.

## Conclusion

The historic city of Tripoli is a city that actively shirks the violent and dangerous labels attributed to it, which are often based on fear or stereotypes. However, like the rest of Lebanon, Tripoli has experienced a history pockmarked by sporadic violence—leaving their marks on many of the city's buildings. This acknowledgement of a sometimes violent past is not to confirm Tripoli's violent reputation, nor is it to say that its people are inherently violent. Rather, Tripoli can be best described as a city sitting atop of series of fault lines, stretching from faraway cities like Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem.

---

[36] Ali Younes, "Israel Calls for End of UN Palestinian Refugee Agency," *Al Jazeera English*, June 12, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/israeli-calls-palestinian-refugee-agency-170611214423120.html.

[37] Mahmoud Zayyat, "Lebanon conducts first-ever census of Palestinian refugees," The Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee, December 26, 2017, available at http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/selected-articles/lebanon-conducts-first-ever-census-of-palestinian/401/en

[38] Victoria Yan, "Results of Palestinian Census Expected by Fall," *The Daily Star*, August 14, 2017, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Aug-14/415902-results-of-palestinian-census-expected-by-fall.ashx.

[39] *Ibid.*

These fault lines run through the city's streets and neighborhoods, which are further shaped by the city's history, politics, and religions. While Tripoli's residents often dismiss violence as the fault of outside forces (whether geopolitical, regional, or national) simply because they may resonate with larger or outside conflicts, such accusations are not helpful in explaining the reasons that a small but significant minority have been drawn to violence and violent extremism.

Search's research in Tripoli has helped to illuminate many of the most salient pathways that draw youth to violent extremism. While these pathways are plentiful and diverse, they often begin at the conflux of a number of factors that marginalize and disconnect youth from their communities. At the forefront of these factors are experiences of violence, a lack of support or opportunities, and harassment by security forces. Youth that have been tempted or drawn into violence and violent extremism, as well as the civil society actors that have worked with them or been exposed to these trends, shared with Search how groups attracted them with new opportunities to "defend" their identity group, strengthen or pursue a new identity, or to be part of something exciting and larger than themselves—giving their lives new meaning and direction. This notably aligns with this study's framework, which theorizes that violent extremism flourishes as an alternative to achieve the objectives of social movements. In Lebanon, institutions such as political parties, the armed forces, UNRWA, and local governments are created to provide essentials such as religious protection, economic security, and basic dignity to constituents. However, as expressed by participants, the failure of these entities to do so adequately undermines these needs and creates the opportunity for violent extremist movements to mobilize. Most Lebanese youth reject these appeals, but a relative few do not and may eventually be drawn into supporting or engaging in violent extremism.

The research conducted in Tripoli has also demonstrated a variety of hopeful and successful examples of youth and community members preventing violence and radicalization. In the case studies, for example, political and religious leaders intervened to calm tensions and to prevent or discourage further violence. Citizens and civil society groups organized collaboratively to respond positively to tensions and violence and heal Tripoli's damaged social fabric. Others successfully came together to pressure reforms.

This research illuminates, by employing social movement theory, contentious politics theory, and a social constructivist approach, how violent extremist groups benefit from a vocabulary of contention (often towards local and central governments) shared by marginalized communities to build imagined commonalities with them. By creating the illusion of common cause with various local non-violent social movements, violent extremist groups set themselves up as allies and frame their violent approaches as parallel pathways to achieving the movement's (even indefinite) goals. The three case

studies selected and explored here have demonstrated how violent extremist groups may be able to manipulate or even co-opt incidents of social tension to further their own agendas and draw in recruits. Their efforts can even shape or influence narratives surrounding these incidents, such as how a specific government policy change or a single negative encounter with security forces can somehow be illustrative of a broader move to marginalize a specific community.

The 'us versus them' framing employed by violent extremist organizations is often aided by manipulating the concept of collective identity to bring in recruits and sympathizers to collective action. These identities can be political, ethnic, religious, gender, or class, and these groups have proven themselves very adept at doing so in some instances. Furthermore, violent extremist groups frame incidents of social contention as existential struggles and call for in-group sympathizers to join them to protect the collective identity from an external threat. Each incident becomes a fault line where narratives from those within the community as well as from violent extremists begin to frame community understandings and reactions to current crises. These narratives can be hijacked for or unintentionally helpful in encouraging the radicalization of Lebanon's youth.

Despite these potential negative currents, Search's research and over 35 years in transforming conflicts around the world has demonstrated that the frustrations, motivations, and calls to action can be redirected away from violence and violent extremism. That is, early and effective interventions can transform narratives that set groups of people against each other just as effectively as they can transform their approaches to resolving conflicts away from violence.

Resilient individuals and communities have been able to condemn the approaches of violent extremist groups and nuance or reject their narratives. That is, although these incidents of social tension that generate collective action usually lie at the nexus of society and the government, resolving that contention does not require the violent anti-government and anti-civilian approaches proposed by violent extremists. In many of the case studies above, research respondents who were resilient did just that during interviews and focus groups, while those who may have been more vulnerable espoused rhetoric all too familiar to that of violent extremist groups. In these ways, the theoretical framework has been upheld by the research findings.

Perhaps the strongest finding across Search's engagement with marginalized youth, civil society stakeholders, and community leaders is that many of the MENA region's youth are passionate about the struggles they face. For some, this leads to apathy and despair, which were frequently shared with Search. Too many have used violence. Alternatively, many young people also shared commitments to better their societies through nonviolent approaches, rejecting narratives of divisions or prejudice. Indeed,

many of the youth responded to local crises positively. They cleared rubble, founded organizations, became activists, or intervened to prevent violence or someone they know from being radicalized or recruited. The pathways to violent extremism are many, but they are certainly the roads less travelled by.

Through listening to the voices of marginalized youth in Tripoli, Lebanon, this research reveals the linkages between individual vulnerability or resilience with vulnerability or resilience at the meso-level in the community. These dynamics can also be at very personal levels. Youth have shared how their family's teachings have helped them reject direct approaches of recruitment by violent extremists as well as how families have supported the use of violence. Friendships can also be important. For example, one Alawite participant in Tripoli explained how his friends prevented him from becoming a foreign fighter in Syria. Civil society participants also shared their work (personal or through their organizations) to discourage youth from enlisting in violent extremist groups or to disengage if they have already joined. Individual vulnerabilities and resiliencies, as explored in the research above, are therefore critical to the vulnerability or resilience of families, friend networks, and communities.

However, resilience is not the absence of vulnerabilities, nor is building community resilience simply a matter or reducing individual vulnerabilities. Indeed, seeing those men and women deemed as at-risk of radicalization as "chinks in the armor" often contributes to over-securitized approaches that may only serve to further marginalize these members of the community. Rather, the marginalized youth who participated in this research, despite facing a host of issues, benefit from networks that help to provide resilience to their community. These range from families and friends, to religious communities, civil society associations, and local government institutions. While the constraints of this research prevent Search from making definitive conclusions on the detailed linkages between individual and community resilience in Tripoli, many examples were revealed of formal and informal mechanisms to respond to violence and the threat of violent extremism as well as to intervene in the radicalization process of individuals.

The question ahead is how to engage these youth, too often left behind by their governments or communities, to respond or react positively to conflict. Already, most youth see their own families as critical sources of resilience, with most of the youth surveyed reporting that their families can help them resolve conflict. How can their capacities be strengthened? What other national or community institutions, beyond the family, can be enlisted to resolve conflicts? How can those already engaged in doing so be strengthened?

Unlike the fears of many those Search conversed with over the course of this research, MENA's young generation is not hopeless with "nothing to lose." By committing to

reaching the most vulnerable and transforming the way they see and engage with the world, local governments, community leaders, and civil society can transform youth approaches away from violence.

## Recommendations

- **In order to address the overall lack of opportunity in their communities overwhelmingly cited by the youth respondents as a key driver to radicalization, communities should establish initiatives that equip them with alternative approaches to effectively promote change in their communities.** Such initiatives should go beyond traditional employability or job-creation *enterprises* and focus on promoting innovation, creating meaningful social connections, and enhancing youth's perceptions of themselves as belonging and contributing to their communities. Involving multi-stakeholder partnerships in the design and execution of these initiatives, including private and public sector as well as CSOs, schools, and faith-based organizations, can help to institutionalize opportunities for youth development. Ultimately, youth empowerment programming should be community-driven, linked with local institutions, and provide participating youth with a clear and sustainable pathway to a promising future. Specific initiatives could include mentorship programs, civic engagement or environmental clubs, or neighborhood partnerships (akin to sister city or twin town programs) between target neighborhoods and other more prosperous neighborhoods within the same country.

- **As participants in Focus Group Discussion emphasized feelings of isolation and lack of social support, it is recommended that communities prioritize the provision of emotional and psychological support to youth in vulnerable neighborhoods in order to provide them with constructive outlets to cope with sentiments of victimization and trauma that have emerged from previous instances of marginalization and community violence.** This could take different forms depending on the specific country context, but might include investing in school or community counselling services, establishing a youth crisis hotline, organizing community healing or participatory theatre events, or holding awareness-raising campaigns aimed at destigmatizing mental health and psychological support.

- **In light of the direct link made by youth respondents between harassment by security forces and radicalization, it is recommended that future programs seek to provide security forces with the tools to engage civilians, and especially youth, more constructively.** This might incorporate civil society-led initiatives, such as training in community policing or local dialogue initiatives between youth and security forces, as well as top-down government-led reform. Security sector reform initiatives should be aimed not only at reducing community violence, but also at reducing police stereotypes of youth from particular ideological

backgrounds or confessional affiliations. Improving police-civilian relations should ultimately seek to contribute to youth's improved perception of state institutions.

- **In order to address the gaps in service provisions, which were clearly demonstrated as aggravating community violence and violent extremism, future policy and programs should aim to reduce bureaucracy around the provision of services and to make these services more accessible to youth.** From the top, state institutions should work to facilitate youth's access to public service providers by making processes more flexible and responsive to youth needs and designing literature and resources aimed at clarifying complex procedures. Civil society can engage in this process by leading bottom-up dialogue processes with youth to comprehend youth needs and initiating civic literacy awareness campaigns aimed at building youth's capacity to access these services.

- **Given that media outlets were identified as playing a polarizing role in escalating community tensions, particularly in Lebanon, it is recommended that local and national media outlets are provided with training on how to sensitively address the topics of youth, P/CVE, and the marginalization of the target communities**. Journalists should be trained in conflict sensitivity and Common Ground Journalism so as to not exacerbate community tensions, manage rumors, and mitigate the stigma being attributed to marginalized communities with regards to radicalization and violent extremism.

- **Future research should seek to understand in more detail how specific communities define 'protection' and how the desire to seek out or provide protection for one's family or community can contribute to an individual's radicalization to violence or willingness to adopt violent tactics.** Specific attention should be given to how the role of the state interacts with this conception of protection, whether it is through the absence of the state in marginalized neighborhoods through the vacuum of regulation and public service provision or through aggression by state security forces. Researchers should aim to understand how communities can develop a sense of feeling protected or feeling empowered to protect in the absence of strong local institutions without turning to informal violent groups.

- **In order to mitigate the politicization of violent community incidents, it is recommended that future programs aim to build the capacity of Lebanese government officials to constructively address community tensions by going beyond statements of appeasement to taking action in a concrete or symbolic way.** This might include advocating for a policy issue relevant to the incident or paying a visit to the affected communities. Such gestures would be particularly meaningful if enacted by a special committee of multi-confessional government officials aimed at coordinating the government response to the incident, which would demonstrate solidarity at the highest level. Government response should also

take the lead from civil society, which has thus far led the charge on reconciliation and strengthening social cohesion.

- **In order to mitigate the co-optation of violent incidents by identity politics, future programs should focus on expanding cross-confessional and political reconciliation initiatives, including community or neighborhood dialogues, trauma healing, virtual or in person exchange, and shared religious or cultural events.** Such efforts should seek to promote understanding and recognition of a shared humanity beyond group-specific grievances in order to mitigate the risk of retributional behavior during contentious community events that play on group identities. These initiatives should also have the buy-in of local authorities and security forces to ensure conciliatory behavior is modelled and reinforced by community leadership.

- **Recognizing families as a key protective factor against radicalization, it is recommended that future programs empower the family unit as the primary support systems of vulnerable youth.** CSOs providing services to vulnerable families, including employability, mentorship, counselling, and education, should form cross-sector working groups to discuss how to best coordinate their efforts to strengthen families' abilities to respond to radicalization in their homes and communities. CSOs should further work to engage vulnerable families in initiatives to strengthen family cohesion, which would equip families with the tools to adapt to changing social circumstances (such as when a parent loses or gains employment, parents go through a divorce, family emigrates to a new neighborhood, etc.) and provide their children with guidance and emotional support. Finally, families should be educated about the warning signs of radicalization and how to engage in prevention efforts within their families and communities.

- **In order to respond to the lack of community integration referenced by youth throughout the Focus Group Discussions, it is recommended that communities invest in the creation of dynamic public spaces that encourage positive engagement and constructive action among youth.** This could include the redesign or re-conception of existing public spaces where youth are particularly vulnerable to radicalization, such as cafes or sports stadiums, or the creation of new public spaces such as parks, community theatres, or recreational centers. Importantly, the creation of physical public spaces in communities should not be seen as sufficient to provide constructive alternatives to youth vulnerable to radicalization. Such initiatives must also draw on public planning and community resources to ensure public venues incorporate a subliminal environment that rejects violent ideologies, emotions, and actions. These public spaces need not be permanent and could take the form of community festivals or events, which may be most effective in the aftermath of a contentious community event to bring the community together around a common cause or shared identity.

- **Communities and civil society in Tripoli should prioritize the creation of alternative public spaces for women,** who were more likely than men to report frustration with their neighborhoods and difficulty making friends and forming support systems.
- **It is recommended that activists, political, and religious leaders should be offered trainings on conflict transformation and violence prevention.** Effective groundwork should be done prior to the start of protests to give protest leaders more effective tools on preventing violence in protests. Although no guarantee, preparatory work may help to prevent violence from erupting at protests. Security forces should employ nonviolent approaches to de-escalate protests before employing forceful measures whenever possible.
- **Future research should focus on understanding in greater detail whether fighters on both sides of the Bab al-Tabbaneh/Jabal Mohsen clashes had a higher likelihood of becoming foreign fighters in Syria** and, if so, what those pathways were.